

The Hagenspan Chronicles

Book Two



Roarke's Wisdom

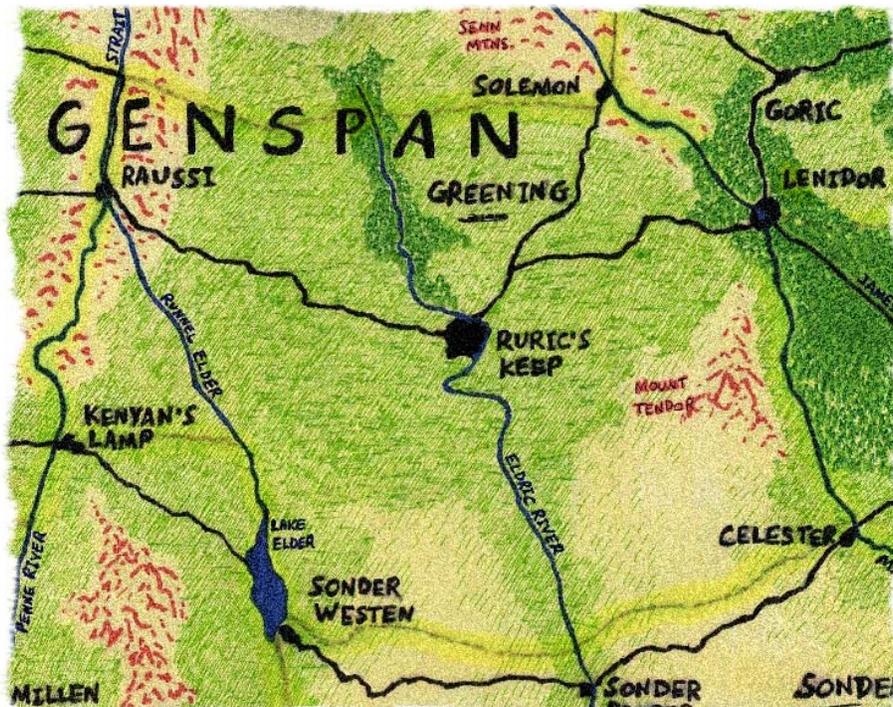
The Courtship of Hollie

Robert W. Tompkins

Roarke's Wisdom

Book Two: The Courtship of Hollie

being chiefly concerned with the events which occurred in the land of Greening



*Trust him? How? How can I trust?
For well I know what lies
within the hearts of hung'ring men—
within the hearts of men.*

*Love him? How? How could I love?
For he has never known
the shades that haunt my tortured night—
the shades that haunt my night.*

*Leave him? How? How could I leave?
But stay I will not do.
My ruined heart is rent in twain—
my heart is rent in twain.*

*Seek me? Why? Why should he seek?
Unless somehow it be
that he is other than them all—
other than them all.*

Chapter One

Barlie took a chance on leaving his post, hoping that Yancey and Captain Lirey wouldn't be too angry with him. Scooping up some small pebbles in his hand, he rounded the corner of the castle and began lofting them in the direction of Willum's window. After several of them had bounced off the wall, clicking and clacking back down to the ground, he managed to get three in a row through the narrow opening.

Will stuck his head out the window, hissing, "All *right!* I'm up! Stop throwin'!"

Barlie called up, as softly as he could while still hoping to be heard. "Ye were right, Will. Roarke's gone an' left the castle."

"I'll be right down. Get Starlight saddled fer me, will ye?"

Will was already dressed, having anticipated the possibility of having to leave in the night. He had stashed packs full of food, blankets, and falconets in the stables near his horse, which his friend Barlie was retrieving. Will crept, as silently as possible, through the center room of his father's chambers. His new stepmother Thalia shared the southward-facing room with Keet; Will paused for a moment by their door and listened to them breathing.

Taking a reluctant step toward the door leading down the stairs, he accidentally kicked a chair, making a very slight squeak on the floor. He paused, listened for the breathing from the other room again, and then made his way to the exit.

"Will," whispered Keet from behind him. The boy froze abruptly, then slowly turned to face his father. He saw the big man standing in the doorway to his room, his brow knotted with something inexpressible. Keet raised his arms,

held them outstretched, and stepped toward his son. Will met him in a crushing embrace—a man's strong hug—that seemed to last for minutes.

"Ye're th' light o' me life," Keet choked into his son's ear. He clapped Will on the back, and thought that he might let go of the embrace, but then held on for another moment. "Remember," he said in a strangled voice, "where'er ye go in this world ... there's an old man in th' north country ... what loves ye."

Will was unable to speak, but buried his face in his father's brawny chest, and squeezed him yet harder.

At last the two men released their embrace. Keet, his face wet with tears, held his son's shoulders, and said to him, "Be sure an' take care o' Lord Roarke. An' if ever ye may, come back t' yer old dad an' we'll have another hug."

"I will, Keet," Will said softly. "Goodbye ... Dad."



Roarke paused and waited by the thicket—he had an idea that Willum might follow him. The reason he had crept out of the castle under cover of darkness was not that he wanted to travel alone, but rather that he wished to avoid any more protracted goodbyes. He dismounted and unsaddled Justice, and prepared to spend the rest of the night sleeping on the ground. He'd give Will a day to catch up, if he was coming. Roarke was willing to go on by himself if necessary—he was no stranger to long miles alone—but if Will *was* coming, Roarke didn't want him to get lost somewhere.

Roarke chuckled to himself; he might even have a bit of fun with Will later. Perhaps he would conceal himself along the way before Will caught up with him, and let the boy pass him on the road, and then sneak up behind him and spook him a little bit. Then he would give the boy a stern lecture about coming along without

having obtained permission, before breaking into a smile and telling Will how happy he was to have him there. When he fell asleep, there was still a faint smile upon his lips.

He woke in the morning to the smell of biscuits and bacon being cooked over a campfire and wondered for a moment where he was. Groggily he raised his head and saw Will bent over the low flame. The two black horses, Justice and Starlight, contentedly grazed on the prairie grass beyond him.

Will saw Roarke stir, and said cheerily, "G'mornin', m'Lord! If I were wieldin' a blade 'stead of a frypan, ye'd be in a bit of a spot today, eh?"

"Will ... you have humbled me," the knight admitted. He thought to himself, *In the end, I may need Will more than he needs me.*

"Ah, ye were just a little tired," Will replied magnanimously. "Come, have some breakfast."

As they sat sharing their meal, Will said, "M'Lord, ye must not deny me th' opportunity t' serve ye. I *will* go with ye."

"Will, my boy. I wouldn't dream of forbidding you from coming along. I already talked with your father about letting you accompany me, if you chose. He agreed."

"Oh," said the boy, and let that thought sink in for a moment. "Then why'd ye leave without tellin' no one ye were goin'?"

"Did you see the faces of the people at dinner last night? So many tears...." Roarke paused to formulate words for his thoughts. "I have cried enough tears in this last year to last me nearly to the end of my days. I have shed more tears this year than I did in the last fifteen combined. It's likely that if we had stayed, it would have just been more painful for everyone involved than if we were simply gone.

"There's another possibility, too. If everyone already cried themselves out last night, and came to the end of their sorrow, then this morning they're going to be ready to move on with their business. Seeing you and me again could conceivably be ... tedious for them. They might secretly wish we would just be getting on our way so they could proceed with their lives. And, you know, that might be even harder to bear than another round of tears.

"In any case, I felt that it would be best just to slip quietly away, and wait for my squire to catch up with me."

"Ye didn't ever!" Will exclaimed. "Did ye really think I was goin' t' follow ye?"

"I was pretty confident."

"Then ... ye want me?"

Roarke reached over and clapped his arm. "Want you? I *need* you, Will. What would I ever do, the first time someone came sneaking up on me with a sword instead of a frying pan?"

Chapter Two

A biting wind filled with needle-like shards of sleet bit into Stark's face and hands as he made his way along the forest path leading east from Goric. He was heading out to the spot beside the road where he, Sinder, and Harres had buried a sack filled with eighty falconets, just over a year ago. It was well known now that both Sinder and Harres were dead, but of the treasure in buried gold, only Stark was aware.

Stark remembered the day he had been to Blythecairne a year ago—the cold, drizzling, miserable rain—and he grumbled to himself that the forces of nature always seemed to be opposed to him, whenever he tried to get some gold for his pockets. He wondered if perhaps he had offended a naiad or a dryad during his careless tramping through the woods. When he was younger, he had often been reckless with his axe, and had taken more wood than he really needed. And he had always taken a perverse delight in urinating into clear pools instead of onto the ground. Now that his beard was growing heavy with sleet, he was keenly sorry for his transgressions.

Stark had wrestled with his conscience for most of the past year; that was why the falconets still lay unclaimed alongside the road. For a time after he had parted company with Belder Payn, he had been able to live on what he could buy with the single falconet he had received from Roarke, and he had tried to make a break with his unscrupulous past. But when that money ran out, he really was at a loss as to what to do with his life. He had worked for Belder Payn for several years, and had largely forgotten what it was like to perform labor for his meat, except for the amount of labor required to relieve travelers of their moneybags.

The bag of falconets was never far from his thoughts, but he was reluctant to go and dig it up, for several reasons. First of all, the death of Belder Payn had occasioned an opportunity for the mendacious magistrate Rulous to become a vocal champion of right and justice (though Stark was unconvinced of his sincerity), and the sudden appearance of so much gold could conceivably be hazardous to Stark's continued liberty. Secondly, Stark was more than a little superstitious, and the idea of taking his old friends' gold was a little unnerving to him. What if their ghosts were to object? But most important of all, his encounter with Roarke had really made a difference to Stark. Even though he didn't have the faintest idea how to do it, he wanted to try being ... good.

He made do for awhile by selling off articles of jewelry that he had previously stolen, often at a fraction of their value. Once he even sold a ring back to its original owner, an elderly merchant who was just grateful to get it back—his grandfather had given it to him, and he had been sorry to lose it. The fact that Stark had once stolen each of these pieces was not particularly meaningful to him; he felt that he was doing a noble act by selling them for his sustenance instead of going out and lightening the purses of even more citizens.

When at last he ran out of pieces that he was willing to part with (for Stark was very fond of jewelry), he took a job with one of the local hoteliers cleaning rooms and sweeping floors. But it was not work that Stark was well suited for, and he soon found that he could scarcely resist lifting small pieces of jewelry from patrons of that establishment. After agreeing amicably with his employer that they should part ways, he found himself spending the summer sleeping in the woods, and eating whatever game he could snare. He kept with him always a small sack of jewels that he had not sold; he would take them out and look at them each night before he fell asleep, gemstones sparkling in the moonlight.

He briefly toyed with the idea of traveling south to Ruric's Keep and claiming that he was the one who had killed Blythecairne's dragon, thus being rewarded with the deed to those northern lands, but he quickly dismissed that notion. What if King Ruric had already heard about Blythecairne? If the deeds of the knight Roarke were already known by the king, then only disaster could result from that attempted deception. He had mentioned this thought once to Rulous, but the magistrate had dismissed it so hurriedly, so brusquely, that Stark had the impression he was already working on a plan of his own.

At last Stark came to the conclusion, with the cold winds of autumn once again beginning to mutter their icy complaints in his ears, and his belly growing tight with hunger, that the falconets buried on the road to Fairling must be unearthed. And here is where Stark made his really noble choice: he decided that he would keep only the original one-third of the coins that he had agreed to with Harres and Sinder, and that he would give the other two-thirds to the barmaid Eyela, if he could ever locate her again. His reasoning was this: Harres had given the other pack of falconets to Eyela, so he would probably want her to have his share of these, too. And Sinder had left nobody behind, so his share would most likely fall to his closest relative, which meant Belder, who was also dead, so must be that share belonged to Belder's widow—also being Eyela. If Stark found that Eyela had also regrettably died in the last year, then he would keep the whole bag of coins for himself, with a clear conscience. For that, he could only hope.

Stark found a spot that looked rather like the place where they had buried the falconets ... but he was unsure. It had been a year ago, and the grass had grown over the place where they had turned the earth. The little stone marker that they had placed there to inconspicuously mark the spot turned out to be so inconspicuous that Stark could no longer identify it.

With his hunting knife, the dwarf started digging beside the road at what seemed to him to be the likeliest-looking spot. After grubbing for a few moments in the ground and finding nothing but stones, dirt, and insects, he decided that he was mistaken, and began looking again for the correct location.

Seeing a stone that looked slightly familiar, Stark began digging again with his blade, unearthing more stones, more dirt, some roots, and some worms. "By th' divvil," he cursed. Tackling another spot a couple of feet away, he created another similar hole, and then another one.

He got up and stumped down the road a few paces farther toward Fairling, thinking that perhaps he had not gone far enough. "Aha!" he cried, when he saw a stone that he thought—he hoped—might be the right one. But after digging five more holes with no more success than before, he began stamping, cursing, and shouting. The sleety rain continued to fall, and Stark was coated with mud from his digging as well. His strenuous exertions with the holes had also made him sweat and tremble, so he was just about as miserable as he could be. The emotional frustration of not finding the gold coupled with the physical pain of his keenly intensifying hunger led him to wonder briefly if he was in danger of losing his fragile grip on sanity.

Deciding bleakly that there was nothing for it but to continue digging, he threw himself back into his efforts with a vengeance, cursing and blaspheming all the while.

Chapter Three

The dragon yawned widely, a thin, screeching whine coming from her parched throat. Becoming more alert as she heard her own waking noises, she suddenly felt like roaring. Rising to her hind feet and stretching limbs long unused, she let a growl begin to build from deep within her belly like water boiling in a teakettle. When it had reached sufficient strength, the beast tilted her head back, opened her mouth, and emitted a sustained roar that reverberated throughout the empty halls of Beale's Keep. The echoes of that terrible noise were heard for several miles past the reaches of the land that this dragon had ruined, but no human ears heard it.

Beale's Keep was located in what had once been a verdant valley between two chains of mountains, the Senns to the east and the Sayls to the west. The snow-capped Sayls were nearly impassable in spots, steep bluffs and icy crags. The more modest Senns were actually a range of low, rolling hills, and were called mountains only by convention.

North of the Sayl Mountains lay the pristine Lake Belanna, from which flowed the twin rivers Strait Penne and Strait Elles to water the western cities of men—Lauren and Ester, Raussi, Kenyan's Lamp, and far to the south, the city of Millen in Sabin's Country.

East of Beale's Keep, on the far side of the Senn Mountains, the Maur Wain flowed, giving water to Katarin, Solemon, and Lenidor, where it became two more rivers—the Maur Tennem and the James River—which both emptied into the Great Sea in the southeast of Hagenspan.

South of Beale's Keep, the Eldric River rose from its subterranean depths to flow through the very center of Hagenspan. Through the land of Greening it ran,

winding around the city of Ruric's Keep before continuing southward and spilling into the Great Sea at Jemai Bay in the land of Sonder.

But in the area immediately surrounding Beale's Keep, which should have been perhaps the richest farmlands in the northern part of Hagenspan, based on natural attributes alone, no humans dwelt. The country's population was not sufficient to demand northward expansion back into the central region of County Temter, which was the least-inhabited parcel of land in all of Hagenspan. The humans had simply abandoned everything in County Temter that fell west of the Maur Wain to the dragon.

Her roaring abated, the dragon was curious to hear a growling sound continue; it was the emptiness of her own belly, complaining to her that she must be filled. Stepping out into the inner courtyard of Beale's Keep, the beast blinked away drops of cold rain that splashed onto her face.

The huge reptile tipped her head back to utter another roar, and was surprised to feel the rain's moisture on her tongue. She remembered then, dimly, that hunting worked better without roaring. She could bawl and sing her victory during the times when men came to her—small, tasty morsels!—but not when she had to hunt for her own meat.

She stomped out to where her circle of defilement ended, and startled a doe that she found grazing there. With one swift motion, she grabbed the deer from above and snapped its neck like a twig. Tearing the flesh and devouring it, chomping happily upon the bones, playfully tossing the carcass in the air and catching it again, her face was soon covered with a slick coating of blood.

From the grass a young fawn watched silently, in relative safety, its eyes wide, black and shining, as its mother was devoured. The dragon, though, stepped too close to the fawn while she was tossing a piece of the doe in the air, causing the

young deer to bolt from its hiding place in terror. The serpent snatched its life from it with a hissing stab of her sinuous neck, and devoured the tender meat.

Her appetite had been sated, but not satisfied. She lifted her head into the breeze. Her nostrils twitched as she sniffed the air for the scent of man. None. Hesitating briefly as if wondering which way to go next, the beast pawed at the ground with her hind claws, uprooting some small bushes and grasses at the perimeter of her territory. Then she lumbered reluctantly back to the comforts of Beale's Keep. The heaviness of slumber began to overtake her almost as soon as she entered the inner courtyard. Whipping at the already-shattered gate with her muscular tail, she sent splinters of wood flying through the air. Feeling something vaguely like satisfaction, she curled around Beale's abandoned throne, her breathing already growing steady, slow, ponderous ... and she slept.

Chapter Four

A light mist still drizzled down from the leaden sky. The riders wore cloaks with hoods drawn up to cover their heads, so they talked but little as they made their way along the path through the brushland north of the Fairling-Goric road. Coming to the road, they turned their black horses westward toward the larger town, and clopped along the way, riding stiffly and trying to keep as much of their flesh as possible shielded from the rain.

In mid-morning the sun broke through the clouds, and the drizzle dissipated. Will turned down the hood of his cloak, and shook his head vigorously, scattering raindrops which had been clinging to his hair. "Don't it smell grand, m'Lord?"

Roarke pulled his hood down too, and turned his face upward to the sky, shaking his head gently as well. "I've always loved the scents of the earth after the rain," he admitted.

"Shall we sing yer mornin' song, m'Lord?" Will asked, and Roarke replied, "Yes, that's fine." The two joined their voices in a simple hymn:

For blessings you shall bring today,

We thank You, God.

Whate'er adventures come our way,

We thank You, God.

You hear us when we humbly pray,

You keep us safe, our fears allay.

We trust Your goodness, come what may—

We thank You, God.

They rode on in silence for several minutes after that, content with each other's company and enjoying the sunshine. After awhile, though, Roarke said, "Will, there's something I've been thinking about, that I'd like to mention to you."

"What is it, m'Lord?"

"That's it exactly, Will," Roarke chuckled. "You almost always call me 'm'Lord' or some other title of respect, and that's been fine. But where we are going, it may be prudent for us not to always reveal ourselves or our relationship to everyone we meet."

"I'm not sure I understand, m'L—sir," Will replied.

"I'm not sure I can really explain it very well," the knight said. "But there may be occasions where some of the people we encounter may be more agreeable with us, if they think that we're just two travelers on the road, instead of a man who's both lord and knight traveling with his squire. We may meet up with men who are stronger than we, and it may not do to let them imagine that we have a small fortune in gold riding along on the rump of your horse."

"How'd ye know about that?"

"Well, I didn't, until you just confirmed it for me. But it made sense."

"I'm sorry, m'Lord. Sir. Ah," he said, perplexed, "what am I *supposed* t' call ye, then?"

"No need to apologize at all, my boy. That gold may come in very handy for us somewhere down the road.

"Will, I'd like to tell you something: So far, you have shown an almost uncanny knack to make ... right choices. You're a fine young man. Trust your instincts. You'll be all right most of the time. And if the time comes when I do have need to correct you about something, I hope you'll be patient with me. I'm not always right either, but I do have a whole lifetime of experience that has taught me things you haven't yet learned.

"As far as what to call me is concerned, well ... most of the time, you don't need to call me anything at all. If it's just you and me together, I'll be pretty sure who you're talking to, unless you start having conversations with Starlight or Justice instead of me! But when we're in the company of others, just call me Roarke. I'll understand that you're not being disrespectful."

"All right, then, m'Lord," Will said, and then giggled, realizing what he had said. "It'll take a little gettin' used to, I'll warrant."

Roarke smiled. "Then you'd better start practicing now."

"Aye, I'd better. Roarke." He smiled back.



A little after midday they came upon a curious sight. On the southern edge of the road, they saw a long series of holes clumsily dug, stretching out for as long as they could see.

Will said, "What d'ye make o' that? It almost looks as if dozens o' huge moles had come up from beneath th' ground fer a peek, an' then headed back down where they belonged."

"I don't know.... Have a care, though. Some mischief may be afoot."

They rode on cautiously for a few tense moments. Coming around a turn in the road, they saw something that at first glance appeared to be a huge clod of dirt lying in the midst of the freshly dug holes. As they drew nearer, though, they realized that it was a man, albeit a small one.

They dismounted and knelt beside the man, who was lying on his back, senseless.

Will said, "He looks kind o' familiar, don't he?"

"Yes ... I believe he's the cousin of Mox who came to Blythecairne with Belder a year ago, though he seems to be much thinner now."

Roarke got a small flask of medicinal spirits that he had obtained from Keet before he left the castle, and dribbled a few drops into Stark's lips. With a sputtering cough, the small man woke, and tried to orient himself.

"I hadn't intended to stop until we reached Goric tonight," Roarke said to Will, "but our friend here needs nourishment. Will you cook something for us?"

"O' course I will." He immediately began looking for wood dry enough to start a fire.

Chapter Five

"Are you all right, friend?" Roarke said to the dwarf, who was trying to sit up.

"Aye," Stark said weakly. "Aye."

"Willum will make you something hot to eat. What has happened to you?"

Stark looked at his benefactor dizzily. "Ye ... ye're Roarke, ain't ye?"

"Yes, friend, I am. Please forgive me, but I can't recall your name."

"Well, there ain't no reason ye shoulda remembered it, I guess. Stark."

"Ah, yes, Stark. Are you all right?" Roarke asked again.

"I must be fell ill durin' the rain storm yestiddy. I appears t' have passed oot. Mighty grateful t' ye fer yer aid."

"Was it you who dug all of these holes?" Roarke asked, staring around in amazement at the dozens of little excavations. "What were you looking for?"

"Well, Roarke ... would ye mind if I had a bit of a spell t' think about me answer, before I given it t' ye?"

The knight was surprised at this request, but granted it. "I'll help Willum get the fire started, while you gather yourself."

"Much obliged."

The dwarf sat on the ground, scratching his bulbous nose and then noticing that his hands were filthy. Mildly embarrassed, he attempted to remove the dirt by rubbing his hands briskly together, but succeeded only in smearing the mud into a greasy paste. He tried wiping his hands on his tunic, and found to his dismay that his soggy clothes were dirtier than his hands had been. "Ah, hell," he said, and gave up.

"Ye don't have another wee nip o' that liquid what ye woke me up with, do ye?" he asked Roarke.

"Yes, I do." Roarke handed his flask to the dark little man, who tipped it back, taking a sip and gasping. "*Uisge beatha* is what this drink is called; I believe that means 'water of life' in the tongue of the people who made it. My friend Keet got it from across the Great Sea—well, he didn't actually *go* across the Great Sea, but he purchased several casks of it and had it shipped here to Hagenspan. We use it as a tonic at Blythecairne."

"Burns when it goes down, don't it?" Stark said, reluctantly handing the flask back to Roarke. "But it's ever so pleasin' in th' belly."

"Here's some food fer ye, Master Stark," Will broke in. "It ain't much, but it's warm."

Stark took the toasted bread and bacon, and nibbled tentatively at it. "By th' gods, that's good," he said gratefully.

"There's more—eat up," Will said, glancing at Roarke for approval. The knight nodded his head almost imperceptibly with a slight smile.

"With yer permission, then," Stark said, and proceeded to wolf down every morsel that Willum had cooked. Roarke and Will shared a crust of the bread while they waited for Stark to finish.

"Now, friend Stark," Roarke began after the dwarf had finished all of the crumbs from Will's frying pan, "has this meal been enough to purchase your story?"

"Aye, it has. An' if ye don't like th' way that it comes oot, then I am at yer mercy." Stark paused reflectively. "Again."

Roarke and Will sat on some fallen trees that were not too wet, and listened with fascination as Stark told the story of his brigand past, leading up to the accosting of Harres the merchant by Stark and Sinder. He didn't flinch when he

told of his part in the robbery, and he sounded genuinely regretful when he told of Belder's murder of Harres. He mentioned the harsh words he had when he parted with Belder, the ways he had made his living during the past year, and told of his decision to retrieve the sack of falconets just days ago. Beneath the wild tangle of his beard, it appeared that his face flushed with embarrassment when he admitted that he could not remember where they had buried the gold.

"An' that brings us up t' now, when ye found me almost as dead's a stone, over there."

Roarke rubbed his eyebrows reflectively. "Stark," he said, "I don't know if this would interest you or not ... but I'd be happy to offer you a job, either in Fairling or at Blythecairne. If you're willing to work, which it seems that you are, judging by the way you have deprived yourself this past year, my man Treadle in Fairling, or else Keet in Blythecairne, would give you work at generous wages. I own several empty houses in Fairling, too, so there'd be places for you to stay if you needed one."

"Thankee, t' be sure," growled the little man. "But what about the gold here, buried?"

"Well, somebody's sure to find it someday. Or, maybe not. I suppose it belongs to you as legitimately as anyone, though."

"Then ye ain't goin' t' punish me fer it?" The dwarf's bushy eyebrows raised hopefully.

"Nothing to punish, as far as I can see. It's certainly regrettable that you and Sinder took advantage of Harres.... But there's nobody left for you to repay, and if your words today are true, then you have tried your best not to return to villainy. Your idea of giving some of the money to Eyela is commendable; she might be able to benefit from it. If you found the gold, that is."

"Aye," Stark agreed. "Another thing, though—ye don't happen t' know where I could find Eyela, d'ye? She ain't been in Goric ever since Belder ... well, maybe ye don't know what Belder did."

"Yes, we know," Roarke said. "Eyela lived with us at the castle for a time. She is now married to Treadle of Fairling, and a happier pair I could scarcely imagine."

"Ye don't say." A look of muted wonder passed across Stark's sooty face. "Well," he said, "I may have occasion t' take one o' yer jobs, Roarke. That I may. But, by yer leave, I'd like t' keep on tryin' t' find that sack o' gold, now that I've got so far in findin' out where it *ain't*."

"Well, that's fine with me. If you don't, though, make sure you don't go hungry. Get yourself on up to one of my places, and tell them I sent you."

"How'll they believe that ye did?"

"Hmm. Tell them I gave you this phrase to say to them: *"Do Justice. Love Mercy."* That ought to get you in the door." Roarke reached out his hand to Stark, and his grasp was returned heartily.

Roarke and Will mounted up and headed on down the road toward Goric. "So long," Will shouted to Stark. Roarke waved to the dwarf, who lifted a stubby arm in a silent salute.

He got down on his knees, took out his scarred and dulled knife, and began to dig again. Under his breath, he repeated, "Do justice. Love mercy.... Do justice. Love mercy...."

Chapter Six

It was dark when Roarke and Will arrived at the outskirts of Goric. Their bellies were growing tight with hunger, and their fingers stiff with cold. Roarke asked Will, "Ever been to Goric before?"

"Nay," the boy replied. "Exceptin' fer th' castle, I ain't never been nowheres but Fairling."

"Hmm. I've only been here once myself, and that was about two years ago. I don't remember where a place might be for bed and board."

Spying a lone townsman walking along the street in the shadows, Roarke hailed him. "Greetings, friend—could you spare a moment for a couple of travelers?"

Drawing near to the pair, the man looked up at them with what appeared to be reluctance, or perhaps guilt. "You don't remember me, I'll warrant, but I remember *you*, Roarke of Blythecairne."

Peering at the shrouded face as closely as he could, Roarke replied, "I am afraid you have the advantage on me, friend."

Chuckling nervously, the man said, "I'll warrant that don't happen very often." He removed the hood of his cloak so that Roarke could see him clearly: a youngish man with a very faint beard, probably several years older than Willum. "Now, don't get alarmed. I mean you no mischief. My name's Hallican, and I rode with Belder Payn to Blythecairne last fall. You gave me a coin and a handshake and sent me on my way."

Roarke said slowly, "Yes ... I remember you."

Hallican continued quickly, "In a way, I owe you my life, for if you hadn't sent me back to Goric, I'd have ended up buried under the dirt up at the castle with the rest of Belder's men."

"Yes, well ... it was your own wise choice that spared your life." Roarke noticed the threadbare condition of his cloak, and asked politely, "Has it been well with you this past year?"

"Oh, passing fair. I ain't rich, mind you, but that falconet you gave me helped me through some rugged times." He reached out and patted Will's horse Starlight. "What is it that I can do for you tonight, Roarke of Blythecairne?"

"Well, my friend Willum and I are looking for lodging for the night, and hopefully a meal. What's the best place in Goric to satisfy those needs?"

Hallican tugged his earlobe thoughtfully. "Well, the *best* is The Cock and Bull, but that's rather pricey. Then there's The Last Dog, but the food there ain't as good as it used to be. The only other public house in Goric is called Buster's—he's a friend of mine, and I'm sure he'd be happy to feed you." He pulled his thin cloak around him to fend off the stiff breeze. "As far as lodging is concerned ... I'd consider it an honor if you'd sleep at my house tonight."

Roarke considered briefly, then reached down to shake the younger man's hand. "Gratefully accepted. Will you allow us to buy you dinner tonight?"

"Well, I've already ate ... but I'd let you buy me a mug of beer."



The next morning, the three men sat at breakfast, chatting amicably. Hallican had prepared the morning meal for them over Will's protests, which Hallican had deflected with, "Allow me, young master. There'll be days a-plenty

for you to grow tired of cooking before you're through with the trail that lies before you, I'll warrant."

Roarke had patted the bench next to him with a smile, and Will had grudgingly acquiesced.

Hallican had told much of his story to the two during the prior evening's dinner: He had been apprenticed to a local tanner, but did not like the work (or the smell), so he had cast his lot in with Belder and sought his fortune at the castle. Fear for his own safety had led him to accept Roarke's offer of clemency and leave Blythecairne in peace. Upon his return to Goric, he had removed himself from the tanner's apprenticeship as gracefully as he could, and attached himself to a tailor instead. Recently he had found a girl whom he feverishly wished to marry, but he lacked the bride's purchase price. The girl's father was demanding a very reasonable fifty rurics, but Hallican's costs of maintaining his own room and board, combined with the meager wage he earned as a tailor's apprentice, made saving those fifty rurics a slow proposition indeed. He was worried that a rival might swoop in with the girl's ransom before he could be allowed to plight his troth.

Roarke brought up the issue of employment again at breakfast. "You know, Hallican, we could use a man who knows how to work with the needle up at the castle. And it wouldn't hurt at all that you know something about leatherwork, either. You would find the wages very agreeable, and your bride would be welcome there, too."

Hallican pondered this silently for a moment. "If I had the fifty rurics now ... I'd do it." He thought a moment more. "Or, if I could get her father to promise me two months with no one else being able to take her away from me ... I'd head out to the castle tomorrow."

Roarke offered, "Would you like me to talk to the girl's father for you?"

"Well ... no," Hallican replied. "I think it'd set better with him, and her, and me too, if I did my own negotiating. Though I thank you for the thought."

"You're quite welcome. Now," Roarke said, rising stiffly to his feet, "Will and I had better be starting on our way." He paused. "I have one more question for you—do you know where I can get a few falconets changed into rurics, for our journey?"

"Well, there ain't no proper bank in Goric, but First Magistrate takes care of any money changing that needs to be done."

"Rufous? Is that his name?"

"Almost—it's Rulous."

"Can you point out his place to me?"

"Sure. It's right down the street from Buster's, just three doors past."

Roarke and Hallican walked to the door, and Roarke said, "Coming, Will?"

"Jest a minute, I'm gatherin' my stuff," the boy called.

Roarke prepared to part from Hallican. "I'm glad I met you again. Can I at least pay you for our bed and breakfast?"

"No, sir, though I thank you again. It's been my honor to be your host." He smiled a crooked smile. "And I thank you for sparing my life last year, for it was in your power to take it."

Roarke grasped his shoulder. "May God grant that it be long, healthy, and prosperous."

Will came to the door, shouldering his pack, and said, "Ready."

The three men exchanged handshakes, thanks, and goodbyes.

As Roarke and Will led their horses down the unpaved street, Will whispered, "I left two falconets on Hallican's kitchen table. That's worth about fifty rurics, ain't it?"

Roarke chuckled. "Well done, Will. You're doing just fine."

Chapter Seven

Rulous the magistrate twitched nervously in his chair. Across from his table was the knight Roarke, who had just introduced himself and sat down. Though he didn't look particularly imposing at the moment, Rulous was still very much intimidated by him. After all, Roarke had killed a dragon, subdued Belder Payn's army, and from all reports, governed Blythecairne with almost uncanny shrewdness for the past year. In addition, he was reputed to be a man who both recognized and required integrity and honor—two characteristics that had been in scant supply in Rulous' earlier life. The magistrate rubbed his sweaty palms against the legs of his trousers.

He wondered if Roarke knew about his involvement with Belder's insurrection. Probably. That damnable old fool Knaiver had gone to live at the castle and had probably told him. So what was he doing here now, in Goric? Had he come to pay Rulous out for his past sins? A cold, thin line of perspiration appeared at Rulous' hairline.

"Master Rulous?" Roarke began.

"Yes," Rulous replied flatly. "I mean," he attempted to recover some of his natural bluster, "Yes! What can I do for you, sir? Your fame precedes you!"

"Well." Roarke looked at the stocky man quizzically. "I have a small bit of business to conduct with you today, if you are up to it."

"Yes, yes, of course," Rulous said evenly, though his eyes widened slightly with a suggestion of impending panic. "Anything at all to serve you, my Lord." He twisted his moustache anxiously.

"I understand you have an interest in falconets."

He knows! Rulous thought, his sense of alarm growing. He smiled blankly at Roarke, and could think of nothing to say.

"Master Rulous?"

"Oh, yes—falconets. Well—*arrhum*—I ... um," Rulous stammered. Then he blurted out, "My Lord Roarke, I beg your mercy! I have tried most strenuously to uphold the laws of County Bretay and King Ruric, ever since Belder fell at Blythecairne. It's the straight and narrow path for me now, you see, my Lord! I beg your pardon. Please, my Lord," he concluded weakly.

Roarke was baffled by this display of disquietude. Knaiver had told him little about Rulous, other than that as magistrate, he had approved of Belder's plan to appropriate the castle, but Roarke didn't hold that against him. Why, he would have granted mercy to Belder himself, if the outlaw hadn't insisted upon attacking.

"Please be at ease, Master Rulous," he said. "I am always happy to see a man who is willing to learn from his errors—"

"Oh, that's me," the magistrate interrupted. "I've seen the error of my ways, and I've repented for the misdeeds of my youth! Now it's nothing but justice. Justice and right, that's what folks'll get from me." He smiled ingratiatingly at Roarke.

"Master Rulous, I don't wish to keep you from telling your story, but I fear that I and my companion must shortly be on our way."

"Companion?"

"Yes, I have a friend who's waiting outside with the horses."

"I see, I see. With the horses."

Roarke was growing slightly impatient with Rulous' apparent inability to focus on the business at hand. "I was told that you act as a moneychanger in Goric?"

"Ah ... yes. Yes, I do."

"Good. Now, if a falconet is commonly trading at about twenty-five rurics, I'd be happy to let you have four or five of them for, say, twenty-two rurics apiece?"

"Oh, no," Rulous protested. "I couldn't possibly demand that much of a profit from our transaction. How about if I give you twenty-six? No ... twenty-seven?"

"Master Rulous, I'm not sure why you think I would possibly want to extort you out of your justly earned profit for your services. Shall we just call it twenty-four?"

"You're too generous, my Lord," the magistrate said with relief. "Yes, twenty-four it is."

"Fine. Can you handle, say, five falconets worth?"

"Well, yes—yes, I can."

"Any more?"

"Well," Rulous calculated, "at twenty-four rurics to the falconet, I can take, say ... fourteen falconets?"

"Really? That's fine. Done." Roarke reached across the table and grasped Rulous' limp, clammy hand. He started to think of some proper platitude to conclude the transaction, but nothing came to mind, so he just smiled tightly and nodded his head.



Will said to Roarke, "That took quite a bit o' time."

"Ah ... yes," Roarke replied dryly. "Master Rulous was only too eager to help, but I fear that he misunderstood my intentions at first."

"I don't understand."

"That's all right, Will. It doesn't matter. Let's have a meal at Buster's, and then be on our way."

"Very good, m'L—Roarke. I had a nice bit o' beef there las' night, an' it would suit me jest fine t' repeat th' experience."

"Yes, that *was* good. When we get to Lenidor tomorrow, though, you'll have to try some fish."

"Ah, I've had fish before. It's all right, but I don't fancy it so much as a nice slab o' beef, 'r venison."

"You've never had fish like they have at Lenidor, I'll bet. At Fairling, you probably only had little ones that were caught from creeks or ponds. But Lenidor sits astride the Maur Wain, right where it splits into the Maur Tennem and the James River, and there are some great, huge fish that swim those rivers, with a nice, white meat that just flakes apart ... ahh!" Roarke sighed. "A little salt, a little butter—" he shook his head gently and closed his eyes in blissful reminiscence. "You have to watch out for the bones, of course."

"Well," Willum said doubtfully, "I'll try it, because ye say so. But it wouldn't hurt my feelin's none t' have a great bloody slab o' steak a-sittin' on th' side, jest in case."



Their bellies filled with meat and warmed by brew, the two travelers left Goric and headed due south.

"If we'd started out the first thing this morning, we'd be in Lenidor tonight. But I didn't want to arrive in the city after dark. When we enter Lenidor, I want us to be able to see."

Will was growing keenly aware of how far he was from home. "Lenidor's pretty big, then?"

"Yes, it's the second-biggest city in all of Hagenspan, after Ruric's Keep."

Will paused to absorb that fact, and then said, "What can ye tell me about it?"

Roarke cocked his head and looked at the boy with a smile. "What would you like to know?"

Will returned the smile, and said, "Well, seein' as how I don't know anythin' at all about the city, anythin' that ye can give me will make me a wee bit smarter, now, won't it?"

Roarke laughed out loud. "Well said, Will!" He searched his memory for a moment, and then began, "I already told you about the three rivers. The Maur Wain flows south out of County Temter, and then lines the border between Bretay and Greening for awhile, before it reaches Lenidor. Did you know that there are six different cities in Hagenspan that touch three separate counties?" Will shook his head no. "Lenidor is the most significant, of course. Where the Maur Wain splits, the western river of Maur Tennem serves as the border between Greening and County Carrel, and then farther south, the border between Carrel and Sonder. The James River—the eastern river—flows right through the heart of County Carrel and empties into the Great Sea. That tells you a little about the rivers, I suppose, though not too much about Lenidor."

"What do folk do there?"

"Well, they do pretty much the same things that people do anywhere. They eat, they drink, they work, they play, they sleep, they laugh, they cry. Some are noble; some are churls. Some are a credit to humanity, and some—the world would probably be better off if some of them never drew another breath." He

stopped, as if surprised by his own sentiment. "Though, I'm glad to say, it's not up to me to sort them out."

"Then, ye mean, it's jest like Fairling, except bigger?"

"Well ... that's almost right. But I want to caution you about a few things. First of all, the people who are good, decent, and kind in Lenidor are probably just about the same as most of the people you have known your whole life in Fairling. I could be wrong about this, but it seems to me that there's a certain amount of decency that most normal folk can attain to, but it's a rare thing indeed to find people who are ... *extraordinarily* good. Oh, I imagine that there are some out there, but the very nature of goodness itself demands that most of its actions be done quietly ... sometimes even secretly.

"The same is not necessarily true of people who are evil. I've thought a little bit about this—though I haven't really studied it at length—but I imagine that it has something to do with the greater concentration of wealth that's found in the larger cities. That's why, in Fairling, you'd have somebody like Boof, who—until he ate the dragon's tail—was rather a ruffian and a thug, but wasn't really a particular threat to anybody. In Goric, however, you'd have a Belder Payn, who actually stole from people and performed careless acts of cruelty. In Lenidor ... well, there are probably people there more sinister and cunning than you have ever imagined. I pray that we don't meet any of them during our travels."

Will took all of this information in silently, occasionally nodding his head.

"The other thing I want to warn you about is more ... personal. In the larger cities, particularly the farther south you travel, I think—there is a kind of ... affected sophistication that the people take on. Do you understand?"

Will nodded that he did, but then replied honestly, "I don't have th' slightest idear what ye're talkin' about."

"It's just this. You must have noticed by now, that you and I have different ways of speaking."

"Aye. Sometimes ye use words what I don't know. An' I ain't jest talkin' about th' words on God's pages, neither. That 'afflicted sustenation' thing ye was jest talkin' about might as well o' been language o' the moon folk, fer all I understood."

Roarke smiled at the boy. "What I meant to say is, in the cities, some folk'll put on airs, and think they're better than everybody else."

"Ah, there, ye see? Now ye're talkin' plain."

"That's just my point. In the cities of the south, some people won't value plain-talking, truth-telling men for just being who they are. If they perceive that we are ... uncultured, in the way that they count culture, well, they might try to take advantage of us."

"Then that's when ye draw yer sword, an' tell 'em, 'I'm Cedric Roarke, darn ye, an' ye'd better be treatin' me wi' respect!'"

Roarke chuckled. "Let's just say that I probably won't do that, Will."

"Nay, I thought not." The boy rode quietly for a moment, and then said, "It would help if'n I learnt how t' talk like you do, ain't that right?"

"Anything that you can ever learn may be helpful to you one day. But yes, I believe that if you learn how to ... speak with a more cultured tongue, it may be to your advantage."

"Old Knaiver tried tellin' us boys that, in school this year past. But we figgered he was jest an old feller, an' it weren't really that important. Besides, we been talkin' th' same way our whole lives, an' it never hurt us none."

"Never take lightly the advice of someone whose hair is white with wisdom. Knaiver wasn't always old, you know. Nor was I."

"I didn't mean anythin', m'Lord," Will protested.

"No, I know you didn't." Roarke looked at the boy closely. "And I don't mean anything personal against you by what I'm going to say next, either. This is just the command of the old knight to his young squire, and it must be obeyed, because I feel that it's to our mutual advantage."

"Yes, sir."

"When we're in a new situation, surrounded by people that we don't know, you must try as hard as you can to say as little as possible. Never reveal who we are, or how much money we're carrying, or why we're traveling, unless you know that you have my leave to speak."

Will said, "I understand. I guess."

Roarke said, "You'll see that I will be doing the same thing myself. It's always better to listen, and not speak, at least until you're certain you have the ears of the people you're speaking to."

They rode on in silence for a few moments, Will digesting what he had been told. Roarke asked him, "Are you all right, my boy?"

"Yes, sir. My feelin's was tryin' t' be hurt by what ye said, but I know ye said what was true, fer my own good." He paused for a moment. "Roarke, would it be okay with you if I jest tried t' copy the way that you talk, until I get used t' doin' it on my own?"

"Yes, my boy, that would be fine," the older man smiled gently. "Have I mentioned to you ... that I am very fond of you?"

"Nay, but I could tell," the boy replied. "That's why my feelin's wasn't really hurt too bad."

Chapter Eight

As soon as Roarke and Will had left his office and headed into Buster's, Rulous the magistrate had sent a hastily scrawled note by the hand of his assistant Whelk (who had replaced Knaiver) to the city of Lenidor, to an associate who had been waiting for this message.

The whole text of the note read, *It is time. He approaches.*

Whelk rode swiftly through the evening, not stopping for a meal or rest. After sunset he arrived at the outskirts of Lenidor, but did not pause until he had crossed the bridge over the Maur Wain, passed completely through the city's darkened streets, and reached the western edge of the town. Making his way through the blackness of the moonless night, he started on the wilderness road to Ruric's Keep, and came to the first house on the left outside the city. Climbing down from his flagging horse, Whelk rapped on the door to the house.

From inside he could hear the sounds of bedclothes rustling and the soft pad of footsteps approaching. A voice whispered from the other side of the door; he could not tell if it was man or woman, old or young. "What is it?"

"I bear a message for Ared Nak," Whelk replied.

"Why do you come at night?"

"It is urgent. I come from Goric, from Rulous the magistrate."

The door opened, and a gray-bearded man beckoned Whelk to enter.

"Are you Ared Nak?"

"Give me the message." He stared at Whelk impassively.

"Er ... yes." Whelk withdrew the folded piece of parchment from his pouch and handed it to the other.

The gray-bearded man scanned the note quickly, and asked, "Have you read this note?"

Whelk said with surprise, "Why, no, my lord!" though of course he had.

"When did you leave Rulous?"

"Late this morning."

"You have done well. Here." He passed five gold rurics to Whelk, and said, "I cannot let you lodge here tonight, but here is money enough, and more, for you to find a soft bed in Lenidor. Now go."

Whelk found himself back in Ared Nak's dooryard, with the door being shut firmly behind him. He took up the reins to his sweating mount, and led the beast back toward the city, wondering where to find a meal and a bed.

As he walked, he noticed an annoying prickling sensation along his back, which he attributed to exhaustion from his day's strenuous doings. He thought that there was something vaguely familiar about the man that he had given the note to, and then realized with mild surprise that he looked a little bit like that knight, Roarke. He felt a sharp sting at the base of his neck, and reached back to slap at it. *Curious*, he thought. There seemed to be a small feather sticking out of the back of his head. That was Whelk's last thought, as he crumpled to the road, dead.

From the bushes alongside the road stepped Ared Nak, tucking his blowgun back into its sheath along his arm. He went to Whelk's body, retrieved his five rurics, and went home to bed.



Rulous drummed his fingers on the tabletop. He had always been an ambitious man, but this was bold even by his standards.

He had been working on a plan for most of the past year, ever since it had been reported to him in a message from Knaiver that Belder Payn had fallen. The first time the idea had occurred to Rulous he had immediately dismissed it with horror, but it had come back to him with increasing frequency, teasing him, baiting him until he had been forced to consider it. After a while, he had sent out tentative feelers ... just to see if there were any possibility that the plan *could* work, should he choose to try it.

In the past spring, he had found someone—a violent man—in Lenidor, who bore a superficial resemblance to Roarke: Ared Nak. He was the same general height and build as Roarke, and had a graying beard; other than that, any cursory examination would see them as markedly different.

But if Ared Nak were dressed in Roarke's clothing, riding Roarke's horse, wearing Roarke's sword, carrying a bag of falconets and a letter of certification from Rulous ... maybe. Roarke hadn't appeared before the king in more than a decade, or so Rulous' research seemed to indicate. Maybe ... maybe Ared Nak could secure the deed to Blythecairne, succeeding by stealth where Belder had failed with force. It was a gamble worth taking, if Roarke's retinue to Ruric's Keep were small.

Ared Nak had received Rulous' proposal with cold silence, and sent him back to Goric without so much as an opinion about his plan. But after a fortnight had passed, he had shown up in Rulous' office and agreed to provide his services to the magistrate ... for half of the value of the treasury of Blythecairne.

At first, Rulous had balked. And Ared Nak had simply left, gone back to his house west of Lenidor, and waited. And the thought of having half of the treasury of Blythecairne at his own disposal proceeded to tempt, to tease, to beguile Rulous so much that it soon became almost all that he could think of. He soon paid another visit to the assassin, and agreed to his terms.

All that remained was for Roarke to begin his journey to Ruric's Keep. If he foolishly traveled on his own, or with but a small contingent of attendants, then Ared Nak could dispatch either one or all, appropriate Roarke's belongings, present himself to the king, and eventually return to Rulous bearing the title to the lands of Blythecairne. Then a story could be concocted about Roarke returning to his other lands in the west, and naming Rulous as the new steward of Blythecairne, with all of the proper paperwork, of course. Certainly the current inhabitants of the castle would have something to say about that, but when Rulous appeared bearing documents signed and sealed by the king's own hand—what could they do?

Of course, if Roarke traveled with any kind of a sizeable force, like any reasonable man would do, then the plan would simply have to be abandoned. So, they waited, Rulous in Goric and Ared Nak in Lenidor, and Rulous instructed his informants to bring him word immediately should Roarke appear to be heading south.

And at last, Roarke had come. Somewhat beyond the year that was required by law, but not overmuch. Not only that, but he had come to the magistrate's own office! When Rulous had watched them head down the street after changing their falconets and stop in at Buster's tavern, he was almost giddy. The only attendant the knight had with him was one boy! Hastily scratching out a quick note to Ared Nak, he called out, "Whelk!"

Chapter Nine

Stark tramped wearily through the muddy main street of Fairling. He had spent two more days trudging dispiritedly around the road near where he thought the treasure had been buried, listlessly digging holes with his broken knife, and at last had come to the conclusion that he had to go somewhere and get some food, or he was going to die. It was actually closer for him to return to Goric than to make the journey eastward to Fairling, but he thought of Roarke's promise of a job, and decided to try his luck at Treadle's operation, whatever that was.

The cold rain spattered down upon him again, and he wondered if the spirits were once more going to keep him from adding coins to his purse. The autumnal gale cut through his threadbare tunic and chilled his belly. "Grateful fer me thick, wonderful beard today, I is," the dwarf grumbled to himself.

After stomping through the street to the center of town without seeing anything that gave him a clue how to find Treadle, he noticed the tavern called The Dragon's Tail. "Hmpp," he grunted to himself with satisfaction. At least it would be shelter, and a fire, and probably information. Maybe he could also coax a meal and a drink out of the barkeep.

He pushed open the door to the tavern, and stopped, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the smoke-filtered light. There were only a few mid-afternoon patrons at the bar, and they turned to see who was letting the cold wind indoors. One of them, seeing Stark's dark silhouette against the brighter light of the outdoors, said incredulously, "Mox?"

The short, fat cook threw her hands in the air, crying, "Ghosts!" and passed out in a heap behind the bar.

"I ain't Mox, ye bloody fools," Stark grumbled. "He was me uncle's son, and I ain't him. I be Stark from Goric, an' I be lookin' fer one Treadle, who's likely t' give me a job."

One of the men at the bar was Huyler of Yeskie's Brigade, who was on furlough from Blythecairne. Stout, gray-haired, and affable, he said congenially, "Come on in, then, little man, and we'll buy ye a mug o' beer. Close that door so's the wind stays where it belongs."

"If I hold th' door open a wee bit longer, would that persuade ye t' buy me a plate o' stew as well?"

Huyler tipped his head back and laughed. "Vinsant, go wake Sallamay up, and have her dish up some stew fer our friend here." To Stark he said, "Climb up here beside me, Stark from Goric, an' tell me yer tale."

The diminutive man complied, clambering up onto a barstool next to Huyler. "Thankee, large feller."

Huyler grinned at Stark companionably, and said, "Well, now. Why d'ye think that Treadle's likely t' give ye work? I'm not sayin' he *ain't*, mind ye, but how'd ye hear about Treadle?"

"Well, I'll lay all me beans on th' table, seein' as how ye're treatin' me t' luncheon. I met that knight, Roarke from Blythecairne, on th' road t' Goric, an' he seed that I was down on me luck, an' offered me work, be it up at th' castle, or fer his man Treadle here in Fairling."

"Ye met Lord Roarke, eh?" Vinsant chimed in. "Me an' Huyler here work fer Roarke up at th' castle; we're jest takin' a month off t' visit our families an' friends back here at home."

"Aye, I met 'im." He thought to himself that the two men could perhaps have remembered him from the day he received the falconet from Roarke a year

ago, but then decided that must be they had been staring straight ahead while standing at attention, and had never really gotten a good look at him.

"Did he tell ye about where he was off to?"

"Nay, it was jist him an' that young feller, an' they headed off t' Goric."

"Well—" Vinsant began.

"Let me tell it," Huyler cut in. "I'm payin' fer th' stew."

Vinsant nodded politely.

"Well, Roarke's headed off t' Ruric's Keep, in order t' secure th' rights t' Blythecairne, an' he took Keet's son Will along with 'im. They're a-headin' off t' meet wi' th' king hisself."

Stark realized that he was supposed to be impressed with that last statement, but instead felt slightly perplexed. "Ye mean it's jist th' two o' them? Carryin' yer whole futures with 'em?" He shook his head curiously. "There's folk ... that would stop 'em if they could." He remembered his own conversation with Rulous some months ago, and the uneasy dismissal he had received from the magistrate.

"Well ... I expect that anyone who chose t' tangle with Roarke would find that he had a battle on his hands," Huyler said, but he sounded a little doubtful. He had not considered the idea before that anyone would try to waylay Roarke on his mission to the king. Probably Roarke had thought of it, but he hadn't mentioned it. At least not in Huyler's hearing. Maybe he *had* mentioned it. Anyway, Huyler was now shadowed by a gray cloud of doubt. "D'ye think that maybe someone should go along wi' them? Maybe we should send word t' th' castle."

"I dunno," Vinsant said.

Sallamay, who had revived herself after her fright from Mox's ghost, said spiritedly, "Ye great bloody oafs! If'n ye can't even decide between th' two o' yeselfs whether 'r not t' go t' th' castle, how d'ye think ye'd ever be able t' decide

whether Roarke's in danger 'r not? Get yer arses up t' th' castle, an' let Lirey an' Keet decide!"

"Well, she's right, ain't she?" Vinsant said to Huyler. "If we leave now, we can be back t' Blythecairne before midnight."

"All right, then," Huyler replied, and chugged the remainder of his tankard with one long draught. "Let's be off. Thankee, Sal'."

"Ahh," she snarled, and threw a towel at him.

After the two had left, Stark asked Sallamay, "Did yon large feller pay fer me vittles?"

"Don't worry about it, Mox, 'r whoever ye are. Ye've p'r'aps did a valuable service fer Roarke, an' he's the one what owns this 'stablishment."

"Mighty grateful," he grumbled. Finishing his dish of stew, he mentioned, "I was rather hopin' that large feller would take me t' Treadle t' interduce me."

Sallamay told him, "I can tell ye easy how t' find Treadle's. Ye jest head on out past th' western end o' town, an' it's th' first place on th' left."

"Past th' western end o' town, first place on th' left," Stark repeated. Something about that sounded familiar. "Thankee, lady. P'r'aps we'll meet again one day." He hopped down off the barstool and banged through the door back out into the muddy street.



As Stark splashed back along the path that he had already taken in the other direction, his mind raced with thoughts. Roarke was in some danger—he was certain of that, though he didn't know why. He remembered his conversation with Rulous and was sure that the magistrate was involved in whatever mayhem may be

brewing, though it would probably not be traceable back to him. *Western end of town, first place on the left.* Where had he heard that before?

Stark also wondered why he particularly cared that Roarke was in danger. Certainly, the knight had been kind to Stark, but they had only ever had two brief encounters. Why, he wondered, did this seem ... *to matter?*

He also considered the prospect of gold, and recognized sardonically that once again he was being soaked clear through by an icy rain. He mused, though, that perhaps a clearer path to a bag bursting with falconets might be by acting as Roarke's deliverer from trouble, instead of by laboring, month after long month, for Treadle at whatever enterprise he was engaged in. Stark thought with distaste that it was probably a farm. Better to ride after Roarke and offer the services of his blade, yes? Even a broken blade in Stark's strong arm would be more help than that mere slip of a boy that he had with him now.

Western end of town, first place on the left. Suddenly Stark remembered where he had heard that phrase before: Belder Payn had once sent him on an errand to Lenidor, to the house of an assassin named Ared Nak. And Rulous' probable plan came into sharp focus in the dwarf's mind. He broke into a trot.



Banging on the door to Treadle's residence at Lirey's old farmhouse, Stark shouted, "Open! Treadle! Urgent business!"

Hearing a frantic barking on the other side of the door, Stark experienced a moment of misgiving. Dogs did not like Stark. A man's voice from behind the door called, "Hold th' pup, will ye, hon'?"

After a moment filled with scuffling sounds and low voices, the door swung open, and Treadle said, "What's yer name, and what's yer urgent business?"

"I be Stark from Goric, an' I need t' know if ye got a stout pony I can buy from ye?"

"Well, that depends, Master Stark. Everything here belongs to Lord Roarke of Blythecairne, and I can't just sell it lightly."

"Aye, I know Roarke. It's him what sent me t' ye. An' it's on a matter of his business that I needs that pony."

From the next room stepped Eyela, with a sword drawn and pointed at Stark's beard. "Treadle," she said, "don't trust this man. He was one of Belder Payn's men."

"Really?" the man's eyebrows raised, but he continued to stare blankly ahead. Stark quickly realized that Treadle was blind. He looked at the woman then, and saw her ruined face. In spite of his circumstances, he blurted, "Ah, lassie! Yer face!"

"Yes," she smiled tightly. "Belder did this to me. It's a rare person who sees my face these days; you are only the second man to see me since Belder did it." She held the sword steady with both hands.

Treadle asked, "What about this, Stark?"

"Aye, I was one o' Belder's men fer awhile. But when Roarke sent us away from th' castle a year back, I left in peace, an' parted ways wi' Belder forever. Since then I been tryin' t' scrape out a livin' on me own steam, an' not doin' all that well. I met Roarke on th' road jest a couple o' days ago, an' told him my tale, an' he told me t' come t' ye fer a job."

"And why should we believe this?" Eyela demanded.

"He give me some secret words t' tell ye. Let's see—it was "*Love justice. Do mercy.*" No, wait, it was "*Do justice. Love mercy.*" Ah, damn, I forget; it was one of 'em."

"That does sound like Roarke," Treadle admitted. "If he sent ye t' me fer a job, then what's this about a pony?"

"Yer Roarke's in a spot o' trouble, I fear. He's headed oot t' meet th' king, with only that cub of a boy t' guard him, an' I have reason t' b'lieve that there's a plot against 'im. It's in me heart t' take out an' protect 'im, if ye give me leave."

"Why haven't you sent word to Blythecairne?" Eyela snapped. "Captain Lirey can send someone more suited to protect Roarke than one dwarf with a broken knife."

"I already sent a large tubby feller an' his sidekick up t' warn th' castle. Ye can check wi' th' folk at th' tavern t' see if it's true."

"And why do ye think ye can help Roarke?" Treadle asked reasonably.

"Because I b'lieve I know what the plan is, an' who th' villain is what's goin' t' carry it oot." Stark said, growing more animated, "We're wastin' time here. If yer folk from th' castle can catch up wi' Roarke, I'll leave 'em be, an' bring yer pony back t' ye. But right now, yer Roarke needs help, if it ain't already too late!"

Eyela, remaining suspicious, said, "How do we know he doesn't just want to steal our pony?"

"Damnation!" Stark roared. "I didn't say *give* me a pony, I said *sell* me a pony! Here." And he withdrew from his cloak his most prized possession—his small sack filled with precious jewels. "If that ain't enough t' buy one pony, then I'm at th' wrong farm!"

Eyela lowered the sword, and took the bag from Stark. "Treadle, he's got enough jewels in here to buy every horse in the barn," she said softly.

Stark said, "Jest keep them jewels fer me, an' when I come back wi' yer pony, ye can give me back as many of 'em as seems fittin' t' ye."

Treadle made his decision. "Eyela, me love, would ye please take Master Stark out an' help 'im saddle up that little quick pony, th' one ye call Bee?"

She hesitated just a second; Bee was her favorite. But she realized that her husband was right—Bee was the fastest and strongest pony on the farm. "Come," she said.

"Thankee both," Stark said. "Ye won't be sorry."

Chapter Ten

It was the third day that Roarke and Will had spent in Lenidor. Despite the fact that Roarke had wanted to show Will around the city, they had been virtually sequestered in their hotel room for the entire three days due to the weather—"one of the worst fall storms I ever seen," said their innkeeper.

Sleet and hail blew almost horizontal to the ground, dashing against the sides of buildings, and cracking the glass windowpanes that were popular in the city. Signs, shingles, and shutters were torn off by the gale, to go hurtling through the streets, making pedestrianism a perilous venture. All through the nights the winds gusted and moaned eerily, causing buildings to groan and dogs to whine pitifully.

For the first two days Roarke and Will had been content to rest in their room, talking about where they had been and where they were heading, and going down to the public room of the hotel four or five times a day to have a meal and listen to the conversations of others. Will had tried the fish at one sitting and found it to be nearly as good as Roarke had advertised, but still chose red meat whenever he had the opportunity. By the morning of the third day, however, even the knight was growing restless.

There was a gaming room at the back of the inn where they were staying, but it was scantily attended, probably due to the weather. Even so, Roarke would not have gone in to gamble; he had seen disastrous effects of games of chance upon his people at Castle Thrail. Some of his men, who by rights should have been just as prosperous as any of their peers, were reduced almost to penury due to the fact that their passions were held prisoner by the lust to gamble. After one of his soldiers at Thrail had been found guilty of murder in an incident over a bet, Roarke had outlawed all forms of gambling in all the lands of his province.

Staring through a cracked pane out into the blustery street during the afternoon of their third day of inactivity, Roarke noticed that the skies, though still wild, were growing brighter, and thought that perhaps they might be able to get back on the trail the next morning. Sighing, he turned away from the window and started back upstairs to his room, beckoning for Willum to follow.

Once in their room, they lay back on their beds, with their arms folded behind their heads. Staring up at the ceiling, they mused about the patterns of cobwebs in the corners, and the way the swirling clouds made the light dance through their window. This chamber had two beds—a luxury for which Roarke had paid extra.

Will said presently, "Ain't there anything that we can do?"

After a moment, Roarke replied, "Not really. It's still not a good idea to go outside. And about the only thing here is that gambling room. That and eating."

"Well, d'ye want to try that?"

"What, you mean gambling?"

"Aye."

Roarke thought about his answer for a moment, and then said, "I don't want this to sound too harsh, or too prim. But I will never gamble."

"Oh," Will replied. "That's all right, I was just longin' for somethin' to do."

They lay in silence again for a bit, watching the artistry of a brown spider spinning a web as delicate as a snowflake.

Will tried another line of conversation. "In a way, yer whole life is somethin' of a gamble."

"How's that?"

"Well, ye've based a good bit of yer thinkin' just on them three little scraps of paper in yer pouch. It's kind of like, ye've wagered yer whole life on ... the hope that God is *good*."

"An interesting thought," Roarke said, impressed. "Will, you're really rather perceptive."

"Glad ye noticed," the boy smiled.

"Mm-hmm," the knight smiled back. "You know, though ... it hasn't been too much of a gamble to believe that God is good. The Creator who taught the spider how to spin its glorious little tapestry is the same one who has made flowers and music and springtime. He has created a longing in the hearts of men, for beauty and truth. For love. And those men who are the most interested in knowing about God ... are usually the ones who are the most endowed with gentleness, kindness, and mercy. If the people that seek God tend to be good, at least as far as men can be, then how much more would God Himself be ... good?"

He sighed. "No, the real risk for me was not in believing that God was good, loving, and kind. It was in believing that God could love ... *me*."

"Why d'ye say that?" Will looked at Roarke quizzically.

"Well, I made some poor choices, some *evil* choices, when I was younger. I did some things that caused a great deal of pain to people that I was supposed to care about. And I blamed myself for my wife's death, for ages."

"That was the dragon, though, right?"

"Well, yes ... but I was not at home when the dragon struck, and I should have been."

Will had considered this aspect of Roarke's history before. "The way I figure it is, if ye'da been at home with yer wife when the dragon showed up, it woulda just ate you, too, along with her. Sorry ... I didn't mean to speak out o' turn."

"No—again, you're right, Will. It was the fact that the dragon had struck my home that made me into the man that I am now, for better or worse. Before that attack, I didn't even own a sword. And I certainly didn't possess the kind of

emotional fortitude—the detachment from my own self-interest—that would have allowed me to kill a dragon ... let alone three dragons. Ultimately, I was allowed to save many lives and much property, instead of just being a small morsel for a serpent.

"I came to believe that this was part of God's design for my life, even though it had begun as sadly as that. But for several years, I wallowed in guilt and self-incrimination, scarcely allowing myself to believe that the Almighty could forgive one like me.

"Still, I determined that I would lead Castle Thrail as kindly as I could. I had killed the foul beast and delivered the lives of my people. And I had looked into the blackness of my own soul and seen a different kind of demon lurking there. The second caused me more sorrow than the first."

"Ye're just full of happy thoughts today, aren't ye?"

The knight smiled sardonically. "Part of the hazard of being me, I fear. I am sometimes prone to long bouts of introspection that leave me, well, a little melancholy."

"That's sad, right?"

"Yes," Roarke smiled again. "Do you know what made the biggest change in my life? After killing that dragon, of course."

"Tell me."

"It was when the ambassador Barnabas came to visit me at Castle Thrail. He had heard, from far across the Great Sea, a rumor that there was a man in Hagenspan who was curious about God. And he came to me from his own land, wherever that was—I never found out—suffering great sickness along the way. And he bore one message only."

"What was that?"

"He said, 'Roarke, Lord of Thraill, I bear you a message from the Most High—the one you have longed to hear with all your heart.' And then he looked at me, and said, 'You are loved.'" Tears sprang to Roarke's eyes at the memory, and he blinked them back. A fresh sense of wonder seldom failed to stir him whenever he remembered that exchange.

"After that ... it all changed. Instead of haltingly trying to be as good as I could, in hopes that I might secure some kind of grudging favor from a stern taskmaster, I instead chose to believe that one simple word: *I was loved*. And all of the good that I had formerly strived to do in my own pitiful strength, began to flow from me naturally, an act of gratitude to the One Who loved me. Instead of being a bad man who was trying to do good things, I became a grateful man, doing whatever came naturally as an act of gratitude.

"Of course, those three scraps of parchment went a long way toward instructing me about the way I should act as a creature of God's making. And, interestingly enough, those pieces of paper are, in a way, what led me to you."

"Really? How's that?"

"Three years ago, I determined that I would travel throughout Hagenspan and see if there were other writings of God's words, that I could either purchase for myself, or else make copies of. And I longed to talk to other men, wiser men than me, who had gone through similar searches, and hear what thoughts they had thought about God. I was in the town of Solemon on that quest, and I had just spent a pleasant evening talking with an old man who understood what I sought, and we had said a short prayer together. After that prayer, he looked at me strangely, and said, 'I perceive that your path leads to Blythecairne.'

"At that time, I knew little of Blythecairne. But I did know that there was supposed to be a dragon there. Of course, I had thought that my days of fighting those wretched serpents had long since passed. After all, I was becoming an old

man. And if I wanted to keep on growing older, it didn't seem prudent to expose myself again to one of my old enemies. But still, I thought—if God wanted me to go to Blythecairne, then to Blythecairne I would go. Perhaps he would reveal more of Himself to me there. Or perhaps that was to be my portal into His own country. Whatever, I determined to obey and see."

"D'ye think that God *did* reveal more of Himself t'ye there?"

Roarke thought for a time before he answered. "I was with Wilton when he died. He heard music from heaven. I didn't, but I believe he did.

"I was with your father right after he asked Thalia to marry him. I saw his face, astonished by joy, and I saw how happy they were together afterward. Joy coming from sorrow....

"I saw Treadle, changed from a man being led along foolishly by nothing more than common greed, into perhaps the most trustworthy man left in Fairling. And he attributed that change to nothing more than simple forgiveness.

"I saw Eyela, whose heart had been broken—crushed—and how love could be born there again.

"I met Lirey and Maryan, and saw that what they had between them was good, whole, and healthy. And that goodness was communicated to everyone who knew them.

"I saw the green shoots of grass and grain, growing again from the ground that the dragon had destroyed. Life bursting forth from death....

"And then, there was my young squire Willum." Roarke's eyes twinkled.

"Aye? What of him? I've heard he was a fine cut of a man."

"Well, a fine cut of a *boy*, perhaps. A fine shadow of a man, to be sure!"

The knight tossed one of his boots at Will, causing him to cry out in mock dismay.

"Yes, I have great hopes for my squire."

Roarke sat up on his bed, and looked at his young friend. "Seriously, though: Did God reveal more of Himself to me this last year? Oh, yes...."

"One of the things that I have pondered about much, while I have been watching this last year unfold, is that for those people whose desires are only for the stuff of this world, they live ... and then they die. Those who place their hope in the next world die ... and then they live. I saw that principle played out many times this year. Eyela, Treadle, Wilton, even the ground. I think that's something that God gave me from my time at Blythecairne."

"That's a good thing, all right," Will agreed. "But maybe ye ought to say a word of thanks to yer God for a castle full of gold, and a whole town full of people what love ye, too."

Roarke bowed his head toward his squire. "Yes. You are the master again, and I am the student. I *do* give thanks to God for those things. His hand of providence has guided and protected me so many times, and given me so many good friends."

"Providence? Don't that kind of mean like God's in control, and that what He says is what happens?"

"Yes, that's roughly it. At least, I think so."

"Well then," Will tossed Roarke's boot back to him, "why don't He provident for us to stop that rain, so's we can be on our way to Ruric's Keep?"

"Who knows? Maybe this weather is indeed serving His purposes somehow. Perhaps we'll understand tomorrow why we were held up. Probably we'll never know. But still we trust, that He is in control ... and that we are loved."

"Well, I'd love it if He were t' provident fer me a nice piece of apple pie tonight."

"Would you like to pray about it, or do you want to just take your chances?" Roarke asked with a grin.

"I b'lieve I'll just take my chances. As ye say, He's in control ... and we're loved."

Chapter Eleven

Stark had ridden the little pony Bee for nearly a day and a half without pausing for more than a sip of water, reaching Goric in remarkable time. Once there, he left Bee with a liveryman that he trusted, and took a fresh pony the remainder of the way into Lenidor. As he rode through the bitter, drenching rain, he thought wearily to himself that—if somehow he was able to protect Roarke from the assault of the assassin—it bloody well ought to be worth a *great* big bag of gold for him. Maybe two.

Upon reaching Lenidor, Stark did not pause, but rode straight through, crossing the waterlogged wooden bridge that spanned the swollen Maur Wain. The rain had subsided to an annoying drizzle by now, but the sun was bright above the clouds, a few persistent beams of its light sifting through. As Stark made his way through the city, weary shopkeepers were out on the street, cleaning up the debris from the storm. Some peered at him suspiciously; some nodded toward him in a veiled greeting. He kept his eyes wary for any possible sign of Roarke or Will, though he suspected he might not recognize the boy.

He passed the last of the shops, and rode through a few blocks of mostly residential structures, which eventually thinned out entirely, turning Stark's path into a road once more instead of a street. He recognized a spot where there used to be a sign reading "Ruric's Keep—Next Town Ahead," but the storm had blown the sign down; it lay face up alongside the road. *Western end of town, first place on the left*, Stark said to himself, and felt for the haft of his broken blade to reassure himself that it was still there.

Just a moment more found the dwarf entering the dooryard of Ared Nak's house, and he realized to his dismay that he hadn't formulated any kind of a plan as

to what to do next. He had been hoping to find Roarke before Ared Nak did, and it hadn't occurred to him that he might have to find the assassin instead of the knight. Cursing his own shortsightedness, he decided to confront his fate head on. Hopping down from the pony, he walked up to the door, and rapped on it with his gnarled knuckles.

No one answered the door after his first knock, or his second, so Stark tried the door handle and found that the house was unlocked. He stepped into an unlit room, but even though the windows were shuttered, enough light filtered through so that he could make out all the objects in the room. To his amazement, he saw on Ared Nak's table a bag that had to be full of coins; loose rurics were scattered across the table next to the little sack.

This presented a profound moral dilemma to Stark. Either he could go on from here and confront significant danger, *maybe* saving Roarke, and *maybe* getting rewarded with gold, or he could take the gold that lay right before his eyes, and avoid any risk to his continued health. Probably the money on Ared Nak's table had been obtained illegally anyway; why shouldn't Stark help himself to it? And it very well might already be too late to save Roarke.

To an onlooker, it may have appeared that he was deep in thought, but to Stark, it felt more like all his processes of thought had been suspended. After staring blankly at the coins for a moment, he muttered grimly, "Damnation." He reached up and grabbed his own beard, tugging it firmly and jerking his gaze away from the table.

"Damn," he said. "Damn. Damn. Damn." He stomped over to where the cinders were in the fireplace, reached down and grabbed a handful of ash. Cold. Ared Nak had been gone for at least a day.

He turned to go, not deigning to look at the table again, slammed the door shut behind him, and mounted the pony. He didn't know if he was a day or five

days behind Roarke, but he determinedly set out to find him. He shouted, "Yah!" kicked the pony's ribs, and then snarled, "Damnation!"



"So, what kind of evil things did ye do when ye were younger, besides not bein' at home when the dragon came to call?" Will asked Roarke. Justice and Starlight clopped slowly along the muddy road, sidestepping puddles. The two men noted where the storm had caused several small trees to fall, either broken or uprooted. A fine mist lingered in the air, but the air was warmer than it had been, almost springlike. The two travelers were not in any particular hurry, and the light spray on their faces was actually rather pleasant.

"Well, nothing major stands out—nothing criminal, anyway," Roarke replied. "But there was just a general attitude of, well, *nastiness* that characterized my youth. A kind of sullen selfishness that cared only for my own comfort, and was perfectly willing to trample any one else if they happened to be in the path." He guided Justice around some fallen branches in the road. "Did I ever mention that I have a sister?" Will shook his head no—it had never occurred to him that there might be more than Roarke in his family. "She's living at Castle Thrail now, quite comfortably, I believe. She's given me two nieces. Nice girls."

He seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, then continued. "I remember one time when we were children, and Ronica—my sister—had made me a gift, a little doll that she had created out of sticks and scraps of cloth. She had made one for herself, and one for me, so that we could play together." He paused, and Will looked at him. He seemed to be struggling with his emotions—Will wondered why. "Well, I didn't want to play. Just a bit of childish cruelty, I suppose,

common enough to children everywhere. But I broke the doll she had made for me into bits, and threw it into the fire. She cried, of course. And I laughed.

"It's strange, the things that haunt you when you're old. I don't know if she even remembers the event at all, but every time I think of it, it pierces my heart. To think—I took a humble gift of love, from the sister who loved me, and I treated it with such contempt as that. I may as well have knocked her to the ground, or spit in her face." He said softly, "What a little bastard I was."

Will didn't know what to say, so he kept silent. It didn't seem so important to him, but he could tell that, for some reason, Roarke thought it very significant.

"When I began to understand that God had forgiven me for all my misdeeds, I was released from much of the guilt that I carried around with me like stones in my heart. But still, I feel sorrow for little events like that one ... not the sorrow of guilt, necessarily—just the sorrow that I ... could ever have *been* that contemptible of a creature.

"When I began to understand God's love for me, there was a release of my guilt, yes. But there was something even better, even bigger, going on inside me. I was ... changed. My very desires were changed. Instead of looking out for my own welfare, I began to want to ... *give*. I wanted to show love, and let people know that they were valuable, cherished, that *they* were loved."

He paused again, frustrated by his inability to communicate what he felt. "This is very difficult for me to put into words. Am I making any sense at all?"

Will said, "Yes, I think I get what ye're tryin' to say. It's like when I was young, an' I disobeyed Keet, my Dad, real sneaky-like. I feel bad about it now, even though he don't care anymore. He and I haven't got nothin' between us now, nothin' but love an' respect. But still, I feel a little sting of sadness when I remember what a little stinker I was."

"Yes. You understand much, young squire."

"Well, ye're not so bad at teachin', neither."

Chapter Twelve

Ared Nak followed the two horsemen on foot. It was no problem to keep up with them, since they seemed to be in no hurry whatsoever, absorbed as they were in their conversation. Nak kept to the brambles and bushes along the side of the road, always comfortably out of sight should the white-haired knight turn to see if they were being followed.

He patted the inside of his arm, making sure that his blowgun was safely in its sheath. It always was, but he frequently checked it anyway. Gliding among the trees and hedges, as quiet as a whisper, sometimes he got close enough to the two riders that he could hear little snippets of their conversation, but they never heard him.



Ared Nak had not always been an assassin. In fact, "Ared Nak" had not always been his name. Once he had been a boy, and it is possible that he could have grown up to be a shopkeeper, or an artisan, or a farmer, or a sailor, if his boyhood hadn't taken an unforeseen twist during the summer of his eighth year.

When Nak was a youth, slender and wiry, he worked alongside his father on the wharves in his hometown of James Bay North, toting small bales and parcels to and from the merchant ships that arrived from across the Great Sea. His father had ridden the waves himself when he was younger, until he lost the use of a hand in an accident involving a malevolent gale and a wind-whipped guy wire. After that, he was a liability on a ship, but his shrewd mind, coupled with great physical

strength, made him an asset to the dockmaster, particularly when he came with the two additional small hands of his son at no extra cost.

It came to pass when the boy was almost eight years old that a great explorer from a race of saffron-skinned men sailed into James Bay in a huge wooden vessel with twelve red sails. His name was Shang Hyo, and he was a hearty captain in his mid-forties at the time, wealthy and honored in his own land. His sailing ship was larger by two times than any of the other boats anchored in the harbor. The men who were with him were small, wiry, strong, and slightly ruthless.

When Shang Hyo arrived in James Bay, he seemed surprised to find a bustling community there; apparently he had imagined that Hagenspan was an uninhabited island, and that he was discovering it. His confusion was unable to be cleared up by conversation with the natives, though—no one in James Bay was able to understand his choppy, birdlike speech.

By using hand signals, gesturing and pointing, the seafaring men were able to communicate rudimentarily with the men at the port, and get their ship provisioned for their voyage back to wherever it was they had come from. The people of James Bay, discomfited by the strange little men with their queer chirping language, were only too happy to see them leave. Not until after the yellow men had been gone from James Bay for over a day did the townspeople begin to realize that several of their children had been taken.

Ared Nak was one of the children who had been kidnapped, kicking and flailing, by the oriental explorers, but his cries had been muffled by a strong hand clamped over his mouth. At first he hated his captors for their arcane speech, their strange smells, and their long black hair, tied in braids at the backs of their necks. As he spent the next several months of his life sailing around the Great Sea in their company, though, he forgave them of those things—but he never forgave them for taking him away from his father.

The boy did not grow to love the wildness of the sea, nor the cold salt wind whipping into his face. He little appreciated the several different cultures he was exposed to on his voyages with Shang Hyo, and he never enjoyed eating the strange foods offered to him by his captors. The only thing he did enjoy was watching them fight.

The small men had ways of fighting he had never seen on the docks of James Bay. They fought with their hands and feet, spinning and twirling like a dance. The boy longed to learn their way of combat, but he was their slave, and they did not deign to teach him. He was not treated with cruelty, but he was not regarded as a proper human being either. Since they could not understand the yellow men's language, Shang Hyo seemed to consider the boy and his fellow slaves as some kind of semi-intelligent beasts, or perhaps the equivalent of women, whom Shang Hyo treated with contempt.

The boy quickly made up his mind to escape as soon as the opportunity was presented to him, but he spent many days aboard the great ship before that happened.

The explorers took every opportunity to stop at ports and absorb bits of the cultures of all the people they encountered. They also increased their store of child slaves at many of these stops—white children from the north, and brown children from the south. Many of the captives wept piteously; the boy wished to comfort them, or at least get them to stop crying, but he could not speak their languages any more than he could understand the yellow men. Some of the children refused to eat, and died, and were cast overboard.

The explorers also stopped at every island they found which had a navigable harbor, to see if there were inhabitants, and to take the time to mark them on the maps they were drawing. They took samples of the fruits and wildlife of each uninhabited place they came to, making the slave children eat the fruits first in case

they should produce any unpleasant effects. Occasionally there was sickness—diarrhea or vomiting—but no children died as a result of this practice.

Finally, after many days of sailing, during which the wind and sun had bronzed the boy so that he looked very nearly like one of the brown children who had been kidnapped after him, he saw his opportunity. Shang Hyo had directed his ship to go far south, farther almost than the world extended, but then at last the vast continent to the east was done, and the ship circled around south of the land of the brown children. When they came around the other side and began sailing northward once again, the brown children's continent was on the left, and a large jungle island appeared on the right.

When the ship pulled into the southernmost harbor of the island and folded some of its red sails in preparation for Shang Hyo's excursion, the boy ran to the side of the ship farthest from land and jumped overboard, slicing into the water below with scarcely a splash. He had been a swimmer from his earliest youth, so he did not fear the depths, but even if he had, he would have judged it a worthy risk when balanced against his freedom.

Unfortunately, several of the sailors saw him plunge into the sea, and by the time the boy had swum around to the shore, Shang Hyo was waiting for him. "*Ared Nak!*" the captain shouted at him. The boy did not know whether that meant *You little fool!* or *What a brave attempt!* or simply *Don't do that!* In any case, he was led, soaked and shivering, back to the company of his fellow captives. The guard who led him back to the other children shouted at him again, "*Ared Nak! Ared Nak!*" Looking around menacingly at the others, he pointed to the boy and said with meaning, "*Ared Nak.*" So Ared Nak became the boy's name, even among those few children who had already known his real name.

Six days later, his next chance arrived. Shang Hyo's ship was passing the very northern edge of the jungle island, getting ready to head far off to the east,

where Shang Hyo's country lay. It was nighttime; the boy could see the distant flicker of a flame afar off on the shore. He was not guarded; the children never were when the ship was at sea. Once again running to the rail of the ship, he leaped overboard, with the cry of "*Ared Nak!*" rising behind and above him.

Once in the sea, he treaded water, watching as the great sailing ship passed. Above him, he could hear the angry gibbering curses of the yellow men, but they did not stop for him. The boy felt for the last time a feeling of awe, as he saw how huge the ship was against the black field of stars. And then, he was alone. In the cold, in the dark, in the wet, he paddled around in a circle until he saw the distant flicker of the shore again, and then he struck out in that direction. He was carried along by the undulations of the tide, its rhythmic susurrations accompanying him like a whispered song.

In the morning he was found unconscious on the shore of the island. Too exhausted to eat or speak or move, for two days he lay senseless, and the natives who had rescued him from the shore despaired of his life. But on the evening of the third day, he became aware of the sensations of sound, of smell, of a tender touch upon his brow. He opened his eyes foggily, and saw a large black woman, with yellow eyes and shining white teeth, bending over him and stroking his forehead with an aromatic leaf.

"Ahh!" she cried, and then she spoke to him, a melodious song of unintelligible gibberish. The boy's eyes must have filled with despair then, for she stopped herself, with a hand to her mouth. Then she said slowly, "*Astkenana*," and gestured to include the entire hut, or maybe the entire village, or maybe the whole world, but at least it was only one word, and the boy nodded weakly with relief.

"*Myanmot*," she said next, and placed a hand on her chest to indicate herself. He nodded again. Then she placed her hand on the boy's chest with a question in her eyes. He tried to remember his name to tell her, and was surprised to find that

he could not. At last he replied, "Ared Nak," to which she replied, "Ahh," nodding solemnly.



For the next several years, Ared Nak lived with the island people, learning their language and their ways, helping them hunt and gather. He became skilled with the blowgun, and knew what kind of poison to put on his darts to produce whatever kind of death was required.

Occasionally, a ship would anchor at the port of Astkenana, and Nak would always seek out the captains, no matter what language they spoke, and ask them pleadingly, "James Bay?" But most of them looked at him with no understanding on their faces, and none of them ever offered to take him home. After a decade had passed, Nak remembered few words of the speech of his youth. He knew that James Bay was somehow important to him, but oftentimes could not recall why.

After six more years of living as one with the island people, a day came when Ared Nak noticed a ship with sails that glowed crimson in the long light of the sunset, gliding in toward the harbor from the east. It was not the ship that had kidnapped the boy seventeen years earlier—it was somewhat smaller than that—but Ared Nak saw, and remembered, and craved revenge.

Hoping against hope that it would be Shang Hyo's vessel, he soon realized irritably that it was not. He reminded himself that Shang Hyo would be rather old by now, if he still lived. But to his amazement, he saw that the captain of this ship was one of the men who had been his captors when he was a boy: Li Chow, who had been just a young man at the time, now mature and dignified.

"James Bay?" Nak asked the captain, when he came ashore.

Li Chow, surprised to hear again the language of that northern country that he had visited so many years ago, replied brusquely, "No. No James Bay."

Ared Nak looked at him steadily, and Li Chow stared back at him, wondering if he should know who this man was, but his black eyes betrayed nothing. Nak nodded his head and bowed, and Li Chow departed to visit the village, and see what had changed there since his last journey.

While the captain and his contingent were bartering for supplies, Nak gathered up a large bundle of fruit, waited for some of the natives—his friends—who bore similar burdens, and carried it up the gangplank to the ship. Directed to the ship's stores by a guard, he deposited his bundle there, but did not leave with his friends. Surprised at how easy it was to stow away, he secreted himself among the casks and bundles in the storehouse, and waited.



For the next month, Ared Nak lived hidden in the storehouse of Li Chow's ship, concealed within a large cask that he had emptied. Every two or three days, he would creep silently up to the deck of the ship, when everyone was asleep but one or two guards, and with the use of his blowgun, would dispatch one of them off into eternity. He was always careful to toss the body overboard after the poison had done its work, so there was no evidence of his presence by the time morning arrived—just one less guard on the ship.

Soon the yellow men were in a chattering panic, terrified of a demon that stalked the deck of the ship by night and silently demanded the souls of the sailors. Li Chow, understanding that his men were losing heart for the voyage, commanded his ship to turn from its northward course (for they were actually sailing in the general direction of Hagenspan) and head back home.

When Ared Nak realized, due to the orientation of the stars, that they were no longer heading north, he determined to make one last revenge, and then cast himself overboard and try to make his way back to land. So that night, he crept to the cabin of Captain Li Chow and opened the door, as silently as a breath.

Removing his blowgun from its ready position at the inside of his arm, Nak prepared to send a dart toward where he imagined Li Chow's chest to be. At that moment, though, a match was struck, and a candle lit, to reveal six of the yellow men pointing curved swords at Ared Nak's face. Li Chow was looking at him curiously—it was he who held the candle.

"Why?" said the yellow captain. When Nak said nothing, Li Chow studied his face for a long moment, and suddenly remembered. "Ahh... You ... Ared Nak?"

Nak allowed himself one bitter nod of his head.



Over the course of the many days that followed, Ared Nak gained a new appreciation for the fighting skills of the yellow men. At least once each day, he was treated to a bruising display of their cleverness and dexterity. They did not break his bones—they did not even break his skin—but they punished him sorely, every day, and then led him back to sleep in a cage every night.

By the end of a month, Nak did not care if he lived or died, and had no idea where he was, other than being in the cage, or being beaten. And his punishment lasted for much more than a month. So it was with great surprise that he found himself being herded off the ship one foggy morning, and abandoned by the yellow men, on the shore of none other than James Bay. Li Chow made a short, unintelligible speech in his own language, bowed toward Ared Nak, and was gone.



That had been over two decades ago. Since that time, Ared Nak had attempted to find employment from time to time at an honest vocation, but always found that there was nothing he was quite so skillful at as silently stalking and killing men, often at great profit. The events of his youth, instead of giving him an appreciation for life, and a sense of gratitude to Li Chow for returning him to his native land, created in him a vast coldness and insensitivity to the common needs and desires of other people. He was different—he was superior—he was Ared Nak.

Most of his business came from the capital city of Ruric's Keep, but he kept his home at Lenidor, living simply and quietly. He was not cruel with his killing, just cold and efficient. He never saw his father again.

Chapter Thirteen

Stark's pony trotted along briskly, on the road from Lenidor to Ruric's Keep. After finding Ared Nak's house empty, he had gone back into the city, to see if he could find out just what the situation was. At the hotel where Roarke and Will had spent the three nights, he had learned that he was only a day behind them, and that they did not seem to be in any kind of a hurry. If Stark put his heels to the pony, he might be able to catch up with them by the next day.



In a stunning act of contempt for his prey, Ared Nak had crept up to Roarke and the boy traveling with him as they slept at their camp alongside the road. His skills at moving silently gave him great pride, and he practiced them whenever there was an opportunity.

Before Roarke had retired for the evening, Nak had actually heard the doddering old fool say, "I don't think we need to be concerned with setting a guard as we sleep tonight. I've been studying the road both before and behind us, and there doesn't seem to be anybody else within a mile. Besides, if anyone approaches, the horses will let us know."

The boy said, "Wouldn't it be better fer one of us t' stay awake, though?"

Roarke agreed, "Yes, generally speaking. However, there have been many times when I have traveled all alone, and sometimes, you just have to sleep. Still, if it would make you feel more comfortable, you may sit up and watch for a bit."

"Maybe just fer a bit, then."

But it had not been long at all before the boy curled up in his blankets and began softly snoring alongside his master. As Nak stared down at them from immediately next to where they slept, he thought how easily he could kill them both now and be done with it. But still ... he had never killed anyone when they were sleeping. The only time he had tried it had been in Li Chow's cabin, and that had resulted in disaster for him. He was not an overly superstitious man, but he thought it best not to tempt fate in that regard, especially when his experience had been so overwhelmingly convincing: Every time he had ever tried to kill a man who was awake, he had succeeded, and every time he had ever tried to kill a man who was sleeping, he had failed.

So he contented himself with lightly touching the hair of each of the sleeping men before creeping back into the darkness and napping for awhile before morning. This would be the day.



Stark had ridden his poor pony until it was quite dark out, before finally stopping for a cold camp and spending three fitful hours trying to sleep. If he had guessed correctly, he would be able to catch up with Roarke and the boy this morning.

The wind began to blow again, from the west to the east, making sleep yet more difficult. He was weak from hunger and exhaustion, and he was exasperated because his bulbous nose would not stop running. At least it had stopped raining. He wrapped himself in his cloak and tried in vain to warm himself with thoughts of a bag of gold.



Morning broke, crisp and clear.

The boy was up early, preparing a breakfast of biscuits and bacon. The stiff breeze blew the aroma of the food directly from their campfire to the brush where the hidden assassin lay in wait. Ared Nak's stomach nearly growled; he stopped it by plucking some grass and chewing it until his hunger pains receded. After he had taken care of the two of them later this morning, he would make some biscuits and bacon for himself out of their stores.

The wind was problematic for the outlaw—it would make it harder to judge the flight of his darts, as well as harder to hear any sounds that weren't blown directly toward him. But he had done it before, in worse conditions than this.

Nak's plan was to wait until the moment that the two travelers were the most likely to be distracted, and not paying any attention to each other. That moment, he judged, would be when they were in the process of mounting their horses.

He watched from the weeds as the two men shared their breakfast, chatting and laughing together. He felt a moment of bitterness as he thought how much they looked like a father and son together, even though he did not believe that they were that. He envied them their easy camaraderie, and wondered for perhaps the thousandth time what had ever happened to his own father. He regretted for a moment that he had never had a son of his own, but quickly pushed that thought away.



Will bundled up the breakfast things in his pack, and then fixed his pack on the back of his horse Starlight, while Roarke was tying up his bundle of blankets and settling them on Justice.

Will said, "Are we almost t' Ruric's Keep?"

"Sometime tomorrow morning should do it," Roarke replied.

"I'm a little scared," Will admitted. "It'll be my first city."

"Lenidor?" Roarke reminded him.

"Well, I don't hardly count that. We were in the hotel the whole time we was there."

"Mmm," Roarke agreed.

"May we sing yer mornin' song?"

"Of course we can."

They began to sing as they stepped to their horses and removed their pickets from the ground. *"For blessings you shall bring today, we thank You, God."*

Ared Nak had heard this song before—the previous morning—and did not want to hear it again. He took one step out of the underbrush to the edge of the road. He removed his blowpipe and fitted a dart into it as Will and Roarke each put a foot into a stirrup and prepared to boost themselves upward.

"Whate'er adventures come our way, we thank You, God."

Stark rounded a corner in the road, saw Ared Nak off to the side of the path, one foot still in the weeds. He could not see Roarke and Will—they were still around a further bend in the road—but he saw Nak bring the blowgun up to his lips, and knew what was about to happen.

"You hear us when we humbly pray."

Whipping his broken blade out of its sheath, Stark summoned all of his remaining strength and sent it spinning toward the assassin. The force of his throw caused him to topple from his pony, hitting the ground with a thud, but he scrambled to his feet just in time to see Ared Nak gasp in shock from the searing stab of his knife—stuck in the assassin's back up to the haft.

"You keep us safe, our fears allay."

Nak, in a furious anger, sent the dart that was meant for Roarke whistling through the air to pierce Stark in the center of his chest. Stark did not feel any physical pain from the dart, but he realized with profound sadness that he had been hit.

"We trust Your goodness, come what may—we thank You, God."

Roarke and Will rode eastward into the bright light of the new morning. Ared Nak, cursing bitterly, stumbled off into the brush to try and remove the blade from his back.

Stark lay on his back in the center of the road, staring vacantly into the morning sun. It was round and yellow and shining like a piece of gold. As he continued to stare at the sun, it grew larger, larger, and whiter—as white as the purest fleece on a sheep—until it was so white and so large that it he could see nothing else.

Chapter Fourteen

The outline of Ruric's Keep appeared on the horizon, still several miles away, but an imposing sight to Will's eager but apprehensive eyes.

"We'll make camp here tonight, and then head on into the city tomorrow morning," Roarke decided.

"All right."

Will began unloading the bundles from his horse, and asked Roarke, "Are ye excited about seein' the king again?"

It was a long moment before Roarke answered, and Will looked at him to see if he had heard the question. "Roarke?"

"Sorry, Will, I just couldn't think of the best way to answer. No, I'm not particularly looking forward to seeing Ruric Serpent's-Bane again."

"Really?" Will was surprised. "Why not, if I might ask?"

"Complicated," Roarke replied shortly. They did their chores then in silence, as Roarke thought about the roads that lay behind and before him, and Will wondered what story there must be hidden beneath the silence. Whatever it was, it must've been a good one.

Later that evening, as they sat around their campfire after supper, Roarke said, "I'm sorry I was so abrupt with you earlier. Let me see if I can tell you this appropriately.

"About twenty-three years ago, I first appeared before King Ruric. It was after I killed the dragon in Haioland, and I was claiming Castle Thrail. Well, I got the impression that he didn't particularly like me, but he was bound by his own law, and gave me the deed to Thrail.

"When I appeared before the king, who is—just between you and me—a rather surly and vain man, I also met the queen, Maygret, in whom it is said runs the blood of the Feie. She was probably about ten years older than me, and it seemed that her marriage to the king was ... not entirely satisfactory to her. Nothing untoward happened between us, of course, but there was a look in her eyes toward me that seemed, well, a little too ardent. No doubt her husband also noticed. Vain and surly, yes, but the king is no fool.

"I made up my mind to go back to Thrail and never set foot in Ruric's Keep again, and I kept that pledge for ... I believe it was about seven years.

"That was when the dragon was discovered living in the Cave of Mendor. I don't know how anyone ever found it; no one was living within miles of the cave. But it's true that the serpent had wakened from its slumber and was on the stalk, just as the one in Haioland had been seven years earlier. And the word had gotten to the king that there was a dragon in his lands that needed killing.

"So Ruric offered great rewards to any one of his people who would subdue the beast—that's how he earned the surname 'Serpent's-Bane'—and he wasted quite a few good soldiers and citizens that way, I'm told. Several of them stopped at Castle Thrail on their way northward. None of them returned.

"If you learned any of Hagenspan's geography from Knaiver this past year, you'll realize that they had to go quite a bit out of their way to end up at Thrail. But you see, that way they didn't have to go through Beale's Keep, where there was another dragon sleeping. Still is, or so I understand.

"Anyway, Queen Maygret remembered me. Ruric certainly did too, but his pride would not allow him to ask me for help. But she, I suppose, was willing enough to act in defiance of her husband's wishes, and so she sent for me.

"To make the story brief, I'll just say that she commissioned me to kill the dragon at Mendor, and promised me 'such rewards as a queen could give' should I return to her safely.

"Well, I went ahead and killed the dragon, after much prayer and fasting. It sounds easy enough to tell it that way, but it was quite dangerous. After I did so, however, I never went back to Ruric's Keep. That, to my mind, might possibly have been more dangerous than facing the dragon."

Will, who had kept silent as he patiently listened to the story, commented with wonder, "Are ye tellin' me that the queen o' Hagenspan ... had the randies fer ye?"

Roarke smiled ruefully. "Perhaps not. But it was a chance I wasn't willing to take. It didn't matter if she was actually attracted to me or not—if the king *thought* that she was, my neck was in danger of being stretched."

"Hmm, yes. I get your meaning."

"Well, there's probably no danger any more. Both the king and queen would have to be rather elderly by now. Perhaps they've forgotten all about me. I hope."

"I doubt that," Will said.



Huyler and Vinsant were back in The Dragon's Tail again. Sallamay was questioning them sternly about their mission back to the castle to raise the alarm, as she had demanded after their meeting with Stark.

"Easy, there, Sal'. We *did* talk wi' Lirey an' Keet," Huyler protested.

"Well, what'd they say?"

Vinsant began, "Well—"

Huyler took over. "Keet said that Roake had gave 'em strict instructions, afore he left, that *no one* was supposed t' foller him, exceptin' fer Will."

"Exceptin' fer Will, eh? Well, what d'ye know about that?" Sallamay wondered.

"Yes," Huyler continued, "an' Lirey said, since we was on th' castle's business, that we could take another coupla days off before we come back t' Blythecairne. An' he said, tell Sal' that she's t' give th' boys a free beer on th' house, fer their trouble."

"He did?" Vinsant asked.

"Yes, he did," Huyler replied, stepping on his friend's foot.

Sallamay said, "I'll jist *bet* that he did," but she served up a round anyway.

Chapter Fifteen

"Don't gawk, Will," Roarke said gently.

"Oh—sorry," the boy replied, continuing to stare in amazement at the panoramic spectacle that threatened to overwhelm his senses. Lenidor had been nothing like this!

The street that they had come in on had been lined with houses, each one more impressive than the finest buildings in Fairling. Some of the structures rose to impossible heights in the sky, being as tall as three and sometimes even four stories. As they drew nearer to the center of the city, though, the residences gave way to shops, markets, and taverns. The path was crowded with vendors noisily hawking their wares from in front of their carts, and shoppers jostling and elbowing from one side of the street to the other.

Rising behind and above everything on Market Street was the imposing stone wall that surrounded the palace of Ruric's Keep. Both the castle and the wall appeared to be enormous, perhaps five or six times bigger than Blythecairne.

Roarke and Will led their horses through the crowd, trying to make their way to the gates leading through the wall into the castle grounds. Roarke tilted his head and remarked dryly to Will, "The city seems to have grown a bit since the last time I was here."

"Ye don't say," Will replied, needing to respond, but having nothing helpful to add to the conversation. He was grateful for Roarke's words, though, which seemed like a safety line to him, tying him to the knight. Will had never even imagined being part of such a throng as this mob that now surrounded him, and he was more than a little uncomfortable.

After patiently making their way through the crowd for over a quarter of an hour, they came at last to a place where the milling multitude thinned out, and realized that they had found what they sought: the massive iron gates to the castle of Ruric's Keep, before which two armed guards, wearing ceremonial finery, stood at attention. One of the swinging metal doors stood open at a slight angle.

Roarke made his way to the cleared pavement in front of the two guards, noticed that one of them was markedly older than the other, and presented himself to that one.

"Greetings, Sir Knight," he said to the guard. "I have business with the king. May we pass?"

"No one may enter these gates without an appointment. Might I ask that you state your name and your business?"

"Certainly. I am known as Roarke, and my business is concerning Castle Blythecairne in County Bretay."

The guard's bushy eyebrows raised, and a spark of interest glowed in his eyes. "Indeed? Welcome, Lord Roarke. It was rumored that you might be coming. I still cannot permit you to pass without a prior appointment, but I will send word that you have arrived, and have your cause entered on His Majesty's schedule."

Bowing his head, Roarke said, "Thank you, my friend. Might I be so bold as to inquire your name?"

"Thank *you*, Lord Roarke. I am called Tiler, Sir Tiler of Raussi. My young companion here is Glassrood of Celester, who is not a knight yet, but is a direct descendant of Courte, first Lord of Celester."

"Well met," Roarke said, shaking hands with the two. "And this is my squire, Willum of Fairling, son of Keet." Will nodded respectfully and

remembered not to speak. He was grateful for how Roarke introduced him, pronouncing his name almost as if it were a title of nobility.

Tiler said to his young assistant Glassrood, "Up with you to Herm, and have him put Lord Roarke on the king's calendar." The younger man left with a short salute. To Roarke, Tiler said, "Mine and Glassrood's week is almost up, here at guard duty. So we probably won't be here when you come back for your audience with King Ruric. Allow me to wish you good luck with him today, since I probably won't see you then. Perhaps, if the king is pleased with you, we can share a meal at the knight's board, and you can tell me some of your adventures."

"I would enjoy that," Roarke said. "So, you don't think we'll be allowed to see King Ruric within the next couple of days?"

"We'll know in a few minutes. Glassrood will be back, and he'll tell you where Herm has placed you on the calendar. But I wouldn't hope for anything less than a week."

"Surely the king isn't that busy?"

"Well, no," Tiler said cautiously. "It's just that, well, sometimes Herm likes to make folk wait a bit before they appear in front of the king."

"Who is this Herm?" Roarke asked, not remembering him from his prior visits to the Keep.

"He's the king's chief advisor—his Prime Minister, you might say. It's not proper for me to speak of it while I'm standing guard, but I'll give you my mind on it, if I should chance to meet you when I'm not on duty."

"Can you join us for dinner tonight?"

"No, not on guard weeks. I must eat with the knights at the palace. But here's Glassrood coming—let's see what news he has for you."

The younger man appeared to be reluctant to come back out from within the castle gates, and it was soon evident why. "Six weeks?" Roarke asked

incredulously. He bit back a curse, and pursed his lips grimly to keep from saying anything he would greatly regret.

"I'm sorry, my Lord," Glassrood replied. "But Minister Herm said that you were to appear before King Ruric six weeks from today, first thing after the noon meal. I dared not argue with him on your behalf."

"No, of course not. Thank you, though," Roarke said, his brow furrowed with frustration.

Will said softly, "Maybe the king don't remember ye after all."

Roarke replied, "I fear that you have it backward, my boy. It appears that he remembers me more keenly than I would have wished."

"Oh."

Roarke gathered his thoughts and his composure, and addressed Tiler once more. "It appears that we will need lodging, for a few days at least, until I decide how to spend these next six weeks. Is there anyplace that you would recommend?"

"Well, sir, it depends on what kind of establishment suits you best. If you like a rowdy joint with fighting and drinking, then I'd say your best bet would be Saucy Kate's. If you like a quiet place for thinking and resting, then maybe you'd like The Martin Board. If you'd prefer something in between, then I'd say you'd be wanting Kenndt's Public House."

"Thank you." He considered for a moment and then asked, "Can you give me directions to Kenndt's, then?"

Chapter Sixteen

Kenndt's Public House turned out to be a dimly lit boarding house, with the windows shuttered and two roaring fires blazing on opposite ends of the dining room. Instead of the long shared boards that were common in most taverns in Hagenspan, Kenndt's featured separate tables that seated four to six guests each, making it a much more intimate setting for dining and conversation than usually offered by similar establishments. There was a candle on each table, and the tables were spaced comfortably apart from each other, so that the serving maids could move easily between them, bringing food and ale. There were three of these young ladies at Kenndt's, two with brown hair, and one with blonde; they were each pleasing to look at, at least in the murky light of the tavern, but Roarke's mind was elsewhere, and he paid them little attention.

Roarke toyed with his food grimly; the meal was excellent, but he scarcely tasted it. Willum, sensing that conversation would not be appreciated as much as usual, cleaned his plate quietly, and spent a pleasant half-hour watching the serving maids at their work.

At last Roarke sighed, and said, "Well, it doesn't do us any good to waste our time or energy on disappointment."

"Maybe God has another adventure in mind for ye ... something else to do before ye meet the king."

"Yes! That's the way to look at it, isn't it, my boy?" He took a mouthful of cold beef, grimaced ruefully, and pushed the plate away. "Well," he said, chewing the meat reflectively, "we have six weeks to spend."

"Mm-hmm," Will replied, distracted by the closeness of one of the dark-haired maidens, who had come to their table to freshen their mugs of ale from a pitcher she carried.

"We could go back to Blythecairne for a month, but I don't think that would be our best plan. We could wait here, but six weeks is a long time to be idle." He took some tobacco from a pouch that had been provided by Kenndt, the innkeeper. "I could take you to Castle Thraill and introduce you around, but by the time we got there, it would be nearly time to come back again." The dark-haired girl, seeing Roarke take out his pipe, came by with a flaming taper so he could light it. Will smiled up at her in appreciation; she noticed his attention and rewarded him with a wink of her eye and a little smile of her own. "Or, we could go someplace else, and see something new. Do you have any feelings about it?"

Will, watching the girl walk away from them back to the kitchen, replied, "I'm seeing some things here I never saw before. Maybe we don't need to decide right away?"

Roarke chuckled. "No, I don't suppose we need to be on our way just yet."

"They're lovely, ain't they?"

"Hmm ... yes, I guess they are," Roarke said, and watched the other dark-haired girl serving a table across the room. "I hadn't really noticed."

"Them two brown-haired girls are awful pretty, but that yellow-haired girl is the best one of 'em all, I'd say."

"Really? Where's that one?" Roarke was not a lustful man, but neither did he mind filling his eyes with beautiful sights when the opportunity arose.

"Over there," Will nodded.

Roarke turned to look, saw, and was stunned.

As he tried to reconstruct the scene in his mind later while he was lying on his bed unable to sleep, he decided that there must have been something in that

moment that was transcendent, even magical. As a practical man, he knew that it must have just been the way the light from the fireplace behind her illuminated her hair, making it look like she was emitting light from herself—that she herself was a creature of light, an angel. As a spiritual man, he felt a stab of panic, when he saw the beatific loveliness of her face, framed as it was by flaming feathers of gold, and recognized instantly that he wanted it for himself. Whether she was a gift from God, or some kind of temptation from a darker spirit, he did not know. All he knew was that he would be content to sit across a table from her and look at her face, not even needing to touch, but just to drink in with his eyes the magnificent, tender, terrifying beauty that he had seen in that moment.

Of the moment itself, it was just that—a moment. In the instant Roarke had turned to look at the blonde-haired beauty across the room, she had been turning toward him, gently laughing, backlit by the fire, and Roarke's jaw went slack with wonder. Unfortunately, this caused his pipe to drop from his mouth into his lap, and by the time he had hastily brushed the ash and cinder from his leggings, red-faced, and dared to look up again, she was gone.

Will gaped at Roarke with concern in his eyes. "Are ye all right?"

"Yes, yes," Roarke replied with embarrassment. "I dropped my pipe."

"Aye, I *seen* that," Will rejoined, and allowed himself a quick burst of laughter. "Ye're quite sure ye're all right?"

Some of the other diners had also noticed Roarke's discomfiture, and were smirking in his direction. "Perhaps we should retire for the evening, Will."

"P'r'aps we should," the young man smiled.

Chapter Seventeen

The next morning, Roarke roused himself early, even though he had slept but fitfully through the night. Willum was snoring contentedly, so Roarke let him sleep.

Making his way downstairs to the kitchen, he asked for the innkeeper Kenndt, and the cook directed him out to the back alley, where he found the man leaning against the wall, smoking some tobacco which had been rolled up into a cylinder.

"Good morning, Master Kenndt."

"Ah, good morning, Master Roarke!" Roarke had given his name to the innkeeper when he had secured his room, with the request that his identity remained confidential. "Sleep well?"

"Well, no, actually, but it was no fault of yours. The bed was excellent."

"Ah, good, good. Sorry about your sleep, though." Kenndt was a short, slender man with a nervous, busy way about him. He was friendly enough, but seemed to always be calculating something, as if he were constantly trying to figure how much gold might become available to him in a given situation.

"What's that you've got there?" Roarke asked, indicating the rolled tobacco.

"From Sonder—one of my suppliers there is trying to find a way of marketing their tobacco so that you wouldn't have to use a pipe to smoke it. Calls it *shegarro*. Don't know if I like it or not."

"May I?"

"Certainly, certainly." He handed the *shegarro* to Roarke, who puffed tentatively at it for a few moments.

"Hmm. I don't know if I like it either. What do you do with it when it burns down to your fingers?" He handed it back to Kenndt.

"Throw it away, I guess."

"That seems wasteful, doesn't it? Where I have come from, you could never afford to just throw away tobacco."

Kenndt shrugged. "Not a problem for them in Sonder. They've got all the tobacco you could ever want, and more." He considered for a moment. "Maybe you could take the stub you have left over, and smoke it in a pipe."

"Yes ... but that rather defeats the purpose of not having a pipe, doesn't it?"

"Seems so," Kenndt agreed. "Oh well, not my problem to figure out." He stood up straight, and stretched his arms, suppressing a yawn. "Well, Master Roarke, have you come this morning because you had something you wished to discuss with me, or are you just passing by?"

"Well, in fact, I do have a question for you, but I'm not entirely sure how appropriate it is, or how to ask it."

"Ah, it's about one of my young ladies, then."

Roarke was briefly surprised, but then said, "What an old fool I am. You probably get asked about them by some silly traveler just about every day."

"Just about." The little innkeeper fixed his calculating eyes upon the knight's face. He had not met Roarke before yesterday afternoon, but had heard the rumors of Blythecairne, the dragon, and gold.

Roarke began, "One of the girls in your employ, a rather striking blonde-haired lass who was working in the dining room last night—what can you tell me of her?"

"Ah, that'd be Hollie," Kenndt replied. "I would've expected nothing less from you, my Lord. She's the prize of my stable."

Perplexed by the phrase the Kenndt had used, Roarke nevertheless proceeded. "Such a lovely girl as that ... she must be married, is she not?"

Kenndt looked at Roarke quizzically. "Lord Roarke, I perceive that you have misunderstood my relationship to the girls. I don't employ them ... I *own* them."

Roarke felt his face growing warm as the realization of his error began to penetrate his mind. "You mean, she's...."

"Let's just say that Hollie and the others are the source of a great deal of income for me," Kenndt said reasonably.

"How did you come to ... acquire her?" Roarke asked, stifling a feeling of bitter anger that threatened to overwhelm his restraint. He was unsure of the reason for the intensity of his emotion, but recognized that it was there.

"Hollie's father gave her to me when she was but eight years old, to settle a gambling debt that he had unfortunately accrued. It got him out of that bit of trouble, yes, but a few years later he got himself into an even deeper pit, and that time he had no daughter or wife to sell. I fear he was forced to make recompense with his own life." Kenndt put up a hand. "Not to me, of course! There are other gambling houses in Ruric's Keep besides mine. And, sadly, not all of the proprietors are as merciful as I am."

"The poor girl," Roarke murmured.

"Not at all," Kenndt objected. "She has been very well-cared-for here. She has her own room, has plenty to eat, has several bits of fine clothing and jewelry. Hollie probably wouldn't ask for her freedom if it was offered to her."

Roarke stared silently at the ground of the alleyway.

Kenndt peered at him thoughtfully. "I perceive that you are a caring man, Master Roarke. It may comfort you to know that she is not used overmuch."

"You're jesting. It seems to me that men would be lining up in droves to spend a moment with her."

"Aye, they would. But I know what a treasure I have there, and it's in my best interests to make sure that she doesn't become common."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you. When I allowed Hollie to be used by a man for the first time, she was a lass of just twelve years. As beautiful as a dove, as innocent as a lamb. I sold her virginity to the highest bidder, for that precious commodity could be offered only once. And, between us, that price is what purchased for me this pub that we're standing behind. Before that, I only had a small gaming house down beside the Eldric River.

"Well, she wept for a few days, as girls always do, but she knew what her father had done, and that she belonged to me. A week later, one of the men who had *not* won her virginity offered me nearly as much as he had before, just to lay with her for an hour. I had struck gold."

Roarke stifled a sharp reply, frustrated at his own emotion.

"I see that I may have offended you," Kenndt purred. "Humble apologies, I'm sure. As I was saying a moment ago, to keep her from becoming common, I only allow her to lie with a man one time each day—and then, only if the price is a good one! Sometimes, I have several men bidding against each other to receive her favors, and then I make money, don't you know! But other times, when the demand is less—shall we say, urgent.... I don't let her go off to bed with just anyone, you see. There are several nights each week when Hollie sleeps alone, which keeps interest in her at its peak.

"I am not a poor man, not any more, and if a suitable price for Hollie—or either of the other girls, for that matter—isn't offered, then their beds shall be unsullied that night.

"You see, Master Roarke ... I *care* for the girls. I'm like a father to them."

This was almost more than Roarke could bear, but he said helplessly, slowly shaking his head, "All I was going to do was ask if she could share dinner with me some night. I'm sorry to have troubled you, Master Kenndt."

"Not at all! Don't give up so easily! Certainly the girl can share a meal with you, if you would like to, shall we say, pay her way. And for someone as wealthy as you must be, I'm sure she could share far more than a meal with you, if you choose to bid."

"We'll see." Roarke looked around the alleyway, hoping to find something interesting to comment on, so he could change the subject. Finding nothing, he turned to Kenndt and said, "Sorry to have taken up so much of your time, Master Kenndt."

"Not at all!" The slender man clapped Roarke on the arm. "And if you should desire to have Hollie for dinner, any time, just ask me."

Roarke nodded at him, feeling something like a great weight of hot, searing iron settle upon his shoulders, making them ache, making him acutely aware of how old he was. He turned, headed back through the kitchen, and up the stairs to find Will. As he trudged wearily up the steps, he whispered mournfully to himself, speaking her name for the first time: "Hollie."

Chapter Eighteen

"Good mornin' to ye, Roarke," Will frowstily called from his bed. "Ye've been about already?"

"Good morning to you, Will," Roarke answered, and smiled bleakly at him. The boy's eyes were closed, though, so Roarke counted his attempt at a smile as just one more wasted effort. The day was not shaping up well.

"Ain't had yer breakfast yet, have ye?"

"No." Roarke lay back on his own bed and sighed.

Will raised his head up and looked at his friend. He had not heard him sigh like that often. But he knew him to be a man of great emotion, strong in laughter and also strong in tears. And though his faith in God was real, he was also prone to occasional bouts of sadness. Will wondered if something had happened to make him sad now, besides the delay regarding his business with the king.

"Roarke?"

"Mm-hmm."

Will asked tentatively, "Are ye well?"

A moment passed before the knight answered. "I'm feeling my years this morning, Will. Feeling my years." Another sigh. "I didn't sleep well last night; maybe that accounts for some of it."

"M'Lord, has somethin' grieved ye this morn'?"

"Yes, I suppose so ... but I'd prefer not to speak about it, not just yet. Can you be patient with me for awhile?"

"Always."

Will got up from his bed, rearranged his clothing, said, "Be back in a bit," and went off to relieve himself.

While he was gone, Roarke stared at the ceiling and prayed. "Almighty God ... I guess I've sped far ahead of your provision once again. I'm sorry.... I saw that girl, and I wanted ... to love her. As if such a creature of so delicate a beauty ... would even *see* me ... but I guess I hoped that my position, maybe ... my money ... would impress her enough that I could just sit with her over dinner, listen to her talk, see her smile.... God, that she might even smile for *me*.... I'm sorry." He rolled over and buried his face in the bedclothes. "And she's just a prostitute. A slave. Poor girl...." Roarke sighed again; he could not seem to stop sighing this morning. "So beautiful, Lord.... And I didn't even get a good look at her. Maybe she's a dreadful shrew ... but did you see that smile, God? I mean, of course you did ... I'm sorry. But could a smile like that hide a personality that was cruel? I doubt it...."

Once again he said, "What an old fool I am." He sat on the edge of the bed with his head bowed, and rubbed the back of his neck. "Hollie." He spoke her name, just to see how it felt in his mouth, what it sounded like in his ears. Then he shook his head with a gentle smile, and dismissed his foolish dream, as if shaking his head could fling the shards of his desire away from his mind.

"I'm all right now, God. Forgive me for getting so distracted, so easily, by a pretty face. A pretty face," he repeated thoughtfully. He raised his head and looked at the morning light streaming through the window of his room. "I'm all right now."

A moment later, Will returned, humming Roarke's morning song. When he got to the last line of the little hymn, Roarke joined him: "*We trust Your goodness, come what may—we thank You, God.*"

"Feelin' better?" Will asked the knight with a grin.

"Yes. I am." Roarke stood and smiled. "Breakfast?"

Chapter Nineteen

Hollie did not serve breakfast; none of the serving girls were in the dining room that morning. Maybe they only worked the later meals.

Breakfast was served by Kenndt himself, who proved to be a gracious host. Thankfully, he did not mention his earlier conversation with Roarke while Will was with him. There were only a few guests for the morning meal, and Kenndt easily accommodated all of them.

Despite his resolve to dismiss Hollie from his imagination, Roarke found himself stealing glances toward the kitchen and off to the stairway, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, wondering where she was. Will noticed his distracted attention, but said nothing. Kenndt also noticed, and smiled to himself; this might be worth much gold.



Will and Roarke spent the rest of the day walking through Ruric's Keep, mostly on Market Street, looking at the goods that were for sale, and listening to the gossip.

They heard references to themselves several times; apparently Tiler and Glassrood had leaked the word to the townspeople that Roarke had arrived to see the king.

After buying a noontime meal of some spiced meat on sticks, along with some kinds of brightly-colored fruits that Will had never seen before, the pair sat on a green lawn somewhat away from the palace wall, chatting quietly together.

"It seems they've heard of ye here at Ruric's Keep," Will said softly.

"Well, it's news, I guess," Roarke admitted.

"Well, since they know all about ye, why don't ye just tell them who ye are?"

Roarke smiled. "There's a difference between the crowds knowing that somewhere in their city there's a Roarke and a Will, and knowing that *we* are *they*."

"Oh, yes ... I get yer point. I believe."

"Think on it a bit, and tell me what your conclusions are," Roarke instructed.

"This meat is good, isn't it?"

"A bit spicy for my tastes. It sure does make one drool, don't it?"

"Try that fruit there. That will cool your tongue."

They finished their meal in silence, except for the satisfied noises of their eating. When they had finished, Roarke asked the boy, "Can you tell me why it's still wise for us to conceal our identities for the most part?"

"I'll try," Will began. "It seems to me that, here in the king's city, ye're not quite so likely to be worried by brigands and toughs. Am I right?"

"Yes, that's true, I suppose."

"But if the whole city knew that ye were the Lord Roarke, then ye wouldn't hardly get to go noplac without someone stoppin' and pesterin' ye about it. Ye'd lose yer privacy, and probably ye'd be gettin' touched up for buyin' food and drinks for everyone at Kenndt's, too. If ye ignored the crowds, they'd maybe get ugly with ye. And if ye didn't ignore them, we'd soon be beggars!"

"Good," Roarke nodded.

"And this—if we were finally driven out of the city by the commotion, then we *would* be targets for thieves—and then *they'd* know who we were, too."

"Good," Roarke nodded again.

"Is there more?"

"Perhaps."

"Then, how about this? If ye let the people know who ye were, and that ye'd killed three dragons, and were the hero of all the northlands, and the people raised a clamor for ye, and ye became a sort of hero here, too, in Ruric's Keep ... then it might not set so well with the king for ye, might it?"

"Remarkable! Really, well done, Will! You amaze me with your insight. How did you arrive at such a conclusion?"

"Well, I was helped along a bit by some of the gossip I heard this mornin'. I understood them to be sayin' that the king and queen don't have no heir of their own. And that the king is gettin' a little touchy about what's goin' to happen when they're gone."

"Yes, that's true. Maygret had a son once, but he died in his childhood, and she bore no other children. It's been suggested that the king has some other bastard children here or there in the city, but he won't own them."

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, watching the crowd of shoppers moving to and fro in the marketplace.

"Ye'd make a fine king," Will offered softly.

"Bite your tongue! Don't even let such a thought come past your lips again! If Ruric ever imagined that I was campaigning for his throne, I'd be a dead man in a hurry, and it would fall to you to ride back alone and tell Blythecairne."

"I'm sorry," Will said, genuinely contrite.

"That's all right," Roarke said, softening. "I know you meant it as a compliment. And the fact is—" his voice dropped to a whisper, "I *do* think I'd make a passable king. But let us never speak such a thought aloud again. When King Ruric passes over to the next world someday—probably years from now—then we'll see what happens to the kingdom."



Before they went back to Kenndt's, Roarke asked Will, "Do you happen to have ten rurics with you right now?"

"Aye."

"Let me have them, please."

With the gold in hand, Roarke made his way through the thinning afternoon crowd to a little shop named Garnet's Pipers, which the pair had visited earlier that day. Stepping directly to the proprietor, he said, "Would you be so kind as to show me the finest pipe that I could purchase for ten rurics?"

The wizened old pipemaker cast a measured glance at Roarke, and said, "Why, there, young feller, ten rurics could buy any pipe in my shop, and some tobacco to boot."

Roarke smiled broadly, and said, "Then give me the finest pipe you have, and keep the remainder as payment for calling me a 'young' man! For I have not felt young today, and your words cheer me."

"Well, now, my boy, you're not so young's you was twenty years ago, are you now? But you'd still be just a pup compared to me."

Roarke's eyebrows lifted. "Do you know me, sir?"

"If my eyes don't fool me, you'd be Roarke of Lauren, what got named Lord of Thrall. And my eyes don't often fool me, even though they seen a dreadful batch of things in their day. Afraid I don't know that youngster you've got with you, though," he said, meaning Will, who was waiting in the doorway.

"My friend, I fear that I must impose on you ... can you please keep it a secret that I am Roarke? I'm trying to keep my presence here in the city as quiet as possible."

"Well, Roarke," Garnet chuckled, "I expect you'll find that there ain't so many people who care about your name as you may fear. But still and all, I'll keep it just atween you and me."

The knight smiled gratefully. "Thank you, good sir."

Garnet grinned and said, "Now, about that pipe—"

Chapter Twenty

Kenndt nudged Hollie, and said, "Over there. The one I was talking to you about."

The young woman saw, nodded, and said, "All right." She had been owned by Kenndt for fifteen years, and had been serving the libidinous needs of his male clientele for ten of those years. She accepted this as the life that was given to her, and she performed her duties without complaint. Kenndt was decent to her, as far as she understood, and he did supply her with good food, clean clothes, and a bedroom that was, most of the time, her own.

She walked over to the table where Roarke and Will had just seated themselves, smiled sweetly, and said, looking at Roarke only, "My name is Hollie. May I serve you tonight, my lord?"

Roarke's breath caught in his throat; then he recovered, and said politely, "Yes, thank you, Hollie." He realized that this move must have been orchestrated by Kenndt, but then he also realized that he did not mind. "Two tankards of your best beer, to start. Do you know what you'd like tonight, Will?"

The boy, who had been hoping that Hollie would notice *him*, said, "Ah ... no. I hadn't thought on it. Could I have just a moment?"

At that, she turned to Will, and pierced him with a smile. *She's even prettier up close than she was from across the room*, he thought breathlessly.

Hollie said, "That's fine—I'll just go and fetch your drinks." Turning back to Roarke, she said, "When I get back, maybe you'll be ready for me."

Roarke felt his heart fluttering high in his chest, like it had somehow gotten out of its normal place. "Thank you, Hollie."

When she had gone, Will whispered to Roarke, "D'ye think she was flirtin' with us?"

Roarke said, rather faintly, "It seems likely."

Hollie came back then with the beer, and placed the mugs down on the table with a clatter. Roarke's tankard was filled to the very top, so that when she set it down, beer sloshed out and splattered on the table. "Oh, my," she said, "forgive my clumsiness, my lord!" She laid her hand on his arm, and bent quite close to him, mopping up the spill with her apron. Her scent was like a delicate breath of flowers.

"No need to ap— ap— my God, I've forgotten the word," Roarke stuttered. "Apologize! No need to. I'm sorry," he concluded.

"Oh, my lord, *I'm* the one who's sorry," she said. "If there's anything at all that I can do to make up for this trouble, just ask."

"No need to. No need to," Roarke smiled at Will with a bewildered look in his eyes.

Hollie stood back up and patted her hands on her apron. "Now, my two fine men, do you know what you'd like tonight?"

At that, they placed their orders—for something—and she went off to present their requests to the cook. Will looked at Roarke with amazement, not knowing whether to burst out laughing, or maintain a respectful silence. Finally, he asked, "Roarke ... do ye know what ye ordered?"

"Of course," he replied, surprised at the question. Then he realized, "Why, no, I don't. I must be getting soft in the head."

When Will didn't respond, but sat staring at his friend with an odd smile on his face, Roarke asked impatiently, "Well, what *did* I order?"

"Mushroom soup."

Roarke shuddered with a spasm of disgust. "No! I never would have." Roarke's dislike of mushrooms had been nearly legendary at Blythecairne during the year he had lived there; he had politely refused to eat anything that contained mushrooms at all. Whenever the main course at dinner had contained the vile fungi, either Maryan or Keet had always made sure there was something else prepared for Roarke's sake, for he would rather have gone to bed hungry than to have ingested mushrooms. "How, in the name of all that is holy, did I ever ask for *that?*"

"Well, the girl, Hollie, said 'What would ye like,' and ye said, 'Suggest somethin' for me,' and she said, 'We've got a lovely mushroom soup tonight,' and ye said, 'That'd be fine.' And so that's parbly what ye're goin' to get."

Roarke groaned. Then he had an idea. "Will—will you trade with me? You like mushrooms, don't you?"

"Ah, sure, I will," the boy said magnanimously. "I wouldn't want to make ye suffer. Though I don't love mushrooms meself—but I can tolerate 'em."

"Thank you," Roarke breathed a sigh of relief. They waited patiently for a few moments, and then Roarke asked, "What did you order, anyway?"

Will, who had been discreetly looking around the dining room, hoping to observe the serving girls at their work, suddenly had a blank look come over his face. "I—" He stopped, and smiled good-naturedly. "Hmm. I guess we'll see when it gets here."

A moment later, Hollie came back to their table and gracefully placed before them two steaming bowls of mushroom soup. "Enjoy your dinner, my lord," she said breezily, and bustled off to take care of another table.

Will looked at Roarke with a grin, and said, "Want to trade?"

Chapter Twenty-One

Kenndt came up to the table apologetically and said to Roarke, "My Lord, I fear that I will have to serve you for the rest of your meal." Noticing the barely-touched bowl of soup, he said, "Food not to your satisfaction?"

Before Roarke could answer, Will blurted out, "Why, what's happened to Hollie?"

Kenndt directed his answer to Roarke. "One of my patrons has expressed an interest in securing the young lady's company for the evening."

Roarke felt a stab of something like panic, tinged with sorrow. Kenndt, watching his face for a reaction, said, "The bidding has not officially been closed yet."

Will said, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Kenndt ignored him, waiting patiently for Roarke to speak.

Roarke felt momentarily helpless, confused. Silently, he breathed a quick prayer: *Lord, I don't know what I should do. Please help me.* He asked Kenndt, "What's the current price?"

"Seven rurics. I believe nine or ten rurics would carry the day for you, should you wish to participate."

"Make it twelve," Roarke murmured, not even sure what he would do if he won, but becoming quite certain that he *intended* to win.

"As you say." Kenndt smiled, and bowed. "I will let you know."

As the proprietor walked away, Will thought how very much like a weasel he looked. "What was *that* all about?" he demanded.

Roarke frowned. "There's something I found out this morning regarding Hollie and the other girls here. I didn't want to tell you, but it seems that that

decision has been taken from me." He hesitated. "Will, do you know what a prostitute is?"

"Ye mean like a doxy, a tart? Of course I do," the boy replied, his face reddening. "Ye can't mean—"

"Hollie is a slave of Master Kenndt," Roarke explained quietly. "He sells her favors at a great profit to himself."

"The foul bastard!" Will proclaimed heatedly. "Can't we do something to rescue her and set her free?"

"Shh," Roarke cautioned. He spoke in low tones. "As far as I know, Kenndt's claim to the girls is completely legal. Let's just win Hollie for tonight, and give it some thought tomorrow."

"What are ye goin' to do with her if ye win her?"

"I haven't thought that far ahead. Maybe she can sit with us and talk."

"That'd be an expensive conversation," Will calculated. "But I dare say I'd like to be a part of it."

Roarke nodded, pensive.

Kenndt came sidling back to their table a moment later, purring, "Good news, my Lord. The other bidders have conceded to you."

Roarke, unsure of the appropriate way to react to this news, said, "What happens next?"

"Well, your twelve rurics has purchased for you about two hours of the young lady's time, give or take a few minutes. Where you spend it is up to you. Most men visit her room."

"Would it be permitted for her to join the two of us here at the table?"

"Yes, if that's your wish. Some men like to have her sit and drink with them for a bit before they go upstairs. But if you decide to visit her room, only one of you may participate."

Roarke replied stiffly, "That is not our intention."

"As you say," Kenndt replied ingratiatingly. "Shall I instruct Hollie to join you?"

"Please."



When Hollie appeared at the table after a few moments, heads turned, and eyes followed her movements from all around the dining room. She had changed her clothing from the shift and apron that she used for work, and now wore a luxurious black velvet dress, with a necklace and earrings of sparkling emerald. She had applied something to her lips and cheeks to give them more pronounced color, and the firelight once again shone from her long golden hair.

"My lord," she said softly, and Roarke and Will both stood.

"My lady," Roarke replied, and extended his hand to her. "Will you sit with us?"

"Certainly," she said, bowing her head, and moved past him to sit across from him, next to Will.

At first Roarke felt a sharp pang of disappointment that she had chosen to sit next to Will instead of him, but he quickly realized that she had done that so that Roarke could see her face-to-face more comfortably. Gratefully, he said, "Thank you for joining us."

She laughed lightly. "Meaning no offense, my lord, but you speak as if I had a choice in the matter."

Roarke's countenance darkened. "My apologies, my lady. Of course you have a choice. You may leave if you wish."

"Well, perhaps I shall retire, then." She gathered her skirts and made as if to stand.

Sadly, Roarke rose to accommodate her. Shocked, Willum did the same, fumbling with his chair and apologizing.

Hollie laughed with delight, a musical trill that was in no way cruel. "Oh, my, the two of you look so disappointed! Would you be happier if I stayed and shared a drink with you?"

Will said earnestly, "Yes, Hollie, that would please us so much more!"

"And my lord?"

Roarke nodded, and sat back down. "Thank you," he murmured.



The next hour passed swiftly. Will did most of the talking, nervously chattering about where they had been and the trip they had made from Fairling. At first Hollie appeared to be only politely interested, but as the conversation progressed, she began to understand that Roarke was somewhat more than just a traveling merchant, perhaps even some kind of nobleman.

Roarke stayed mostly silent, content to look upon the softness of Hollie's face, and explore the crystal blue depths of her eyes. From time to time she would meet his gaze, and their eyes would linger.

He half hoped that he would find something unbecoming about her, so that he could take Will in the morning and leave Kenndt's Public House forever, reckoning the evening as twelve rurics willingly spent, but never to be repeated. But she spoke softly, laughed often, was not rude or discourteous, and in spite of her station, seemed to be rather modest. Perhaps it was an act, played out for Roarke's benefit, but if it was, it was well played.

Hollie listened to Will's stories courteously, occasionally asking small, inoffensive questions to help him continue his tales. Kenndt had told her earlier that the silver-bearded man who now sat across from her had much gold that might be plucked from his purse during his stay. But Kenndt had not told her just who the man was, or for that matter, even his name. Her curiosity was piqued. She glanced up at Roarke, to find him gently studying her face as he had done for most of the past hour, and boldly held his gaze. He was not remarkably handsome, but was comely enough in a mature way. He did have piercing gray eyes, with deep lines at the corners that signified that he either knew much of laughter, or of tears. And the line of his mouth suggested kindness. A good face.

She politely interrupted Will's narrative, which was starting to repeat itself, due to Roarke's insistence that they keep their mission as private as possible. "Pardon me, young master, but the hour grows late, and I must soon retire. But first, I have a request of you. You know my name, but I don't know yours. Will you please tell me?"

Willum looked at Roarke for permission. Roarke said, "Well, my lady Hollie, this young man next to you is Willum of Fairling, son of Keet. And you may call me ... Cedric. I am originally from Lauren, but most recently have lived in County Bretay."

"Thank you, Cedric. May I ask an impertinent question?"

Roarke nodded.

"The price you have paid for my company tonight entitles you to certain other privileges. Are you intending to ... forego that opportunity?"

"My dear," Roarke said, "the pleasure of your company has easily been worth more than the price to Will and me. We require no more."

"You honor me, my lord. May I then please request that you escort me to my room?"

"It would be my pleasure." Roarke stood. Will also stood, trying to hide his disappointment at being left out.

Roarke recognized his young friend's chagrin, and said to him, "Meet me at our room, if you please, Will. I won't be but a moment."

He held his arm out to Hollie, and she took it. He placed his hand upon hers, and they walked slowly up the stairs—a different stairwell than the one that led to the guests' rooms.

She said to him as they ascended, "You are a most gentle man, Cedric."

"Yes, when I can be."

She continued, "I have been gazed upon by many men, as you must know. But I have never felt that I was looked upon so tenderly as I was tonight."

He swallowed. "The loveliness of your face was a feast for these tired old eyes. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

"Nonsense," she whispered. "This is my room here."

They paused for a moment outside the door. She offered, "You may still come in if you like."

Roarke drew a deep breath, and then said, "No. Thank you, Hollie, but no." Untwining her arm from his, he asked, "Might I be permitted to kiss your hand?"

She nodded.

Raising her hand to his lips, he pressed them softly against her flesh for a long moment, and then said regretfully, "Good night, my lady."

As he turned to go to his own room, she called out to him: "Cedric?"

"Yes?"

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"If God permits it, then yes, you shall see me tomorrow."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Will waited impatiently for Roarke to get back to their room; he was bursting with questions. He had little knowledge of the ways of women, but was eager to learn. He hadn't really been curious about women yet when his mother had died four years earlier, so his memories of her were growing faint, and were chiefly of the cooking and cleaning variety anyway.

The town of Fairling had had no loose women living there, at least not that he knew of, and his father Keet had never encouraged that kind of activity at The Stag's Head. He had never had a girlfriend, being rather shy around the maidens of his own age. He had envied Yancey his quick success with his new wife Melliss, and vowed to be bolder himself, next time a girl of suitable age and availability came into his acquaintance.

In fact, most of what Will knew (or at least suspected) about women had been what he had been able to pick up from whispered conversations with the young men of Yancey's Brigade, during the year he had lived at Blythecairne. He had occasionally regretted that he lived in the palace instead of in the barracks with his friends, wondering what the boys talked about into the long hours of the night. But then, if he had lived in the barracks, he would have missed the conversations he had with Keet, and sometimes Roarke or Knaiver, so he didn't regret it too much after all.

He heard a tread in the hallway, a hand at the latch, and then Roarke came through the door to their room, wearing a sheepish grin. "Ah, you're still up," the knight said.

"Aye," Will said incredulously. "As if I could sleep now!"

Roarke said nothing, but sat on the edge of his bed, took out his pipe (his own pipe—not the one he had bought from Garnet earlier that day), and prepared to smoke.

Will began, "What do ye think about Hollie?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well ... what're yer intentions about her?"

Roarke stared through the wisps of smoke that rose from the glowing bowl of his pipe. "Oh.... That's complicated." He began unlacing his boots. "I need to pray about that, Will."

"She's beautiful, ain't she?"

"Yes, she's beautiful."

"She's the most beautiful girl I ever seen."

A moment passed in silence, and Roarke hoped that the boy was starting to nod off. But then, Will asked, "How old d'ye think she is?"

"Well, from what I've been able to piece together, I believe she's four or five years older than you."

"That ain't too old, is it?"

Roarke felt a little swell of sadness pass over his heart, and thought to himself, *No, that's not very old at all.* To Will he said, "Too old for what?"

"Roarke? May I say somethin' bold?"

"Of course you may."

"Well, sir, I recognize that ye're kind of smote with Hollie yerself. I know ye that well. So, all I'm askin' is, if ye decide ye don't want Hollie for yerself, would it be all right wi' ye if I tried to win her for meself?"

Roarke drew a deep breath, and said, "Ohh, Will. That's a long way from where we are right now. And as I said, I need to pray about that."

"Well ... would it be all right with ye if I prayed, too?"

"Will, my boy, I believe it would please the Almighty greatly, if you prayed about anything, any time, or about everything, all the time. And who knows? Sometimes it even seems to please Him to grant our requests, even though we scarcely know what we're asking for.

"But for tonight, let's the two of us pray together regarding Hollie. All right?"

"That'd please me all right."

The two men bowed their heads, and Roarke prayed aloud. "Most High God ... we have no idea whatsoever how to pray properly over this matter. We recognize that the young lady Hollie is a beautiful creature, and is most desirable to us, based on her natural attributes alone. But we don't know what to do next, or even if we should do anything at all. Grant us the wisdom, please, to find out what Your purpose is, and to do what is right. Whatever that may mean to us. Please, Almighty, let this issue not be a cause for any hard feelings between Will and me. And we would also ask You, if You would, to kindly give our new friend Hollie a sweet, peaceful sleep tonight." He paused. "Do you have anything you'd like to add, Will?"

"No, I guess that about says it."

"Amen, then."

Will repeated, "Amen."

Chapter Twenty-Three

The next afternoon found Will and Roarke greeting Tiler and Glassrood in front of the gate at King Ruric's castle. "I'm glad to see your week of guard duty hasn't ended yet," Roarke said to Tiler, who answered, "So am I. Though if you'd waited until tomorrow, you wouldn't have found us keeping the gates, for today's our last day."

"Do you have any news?" Roarke asked, offering his hand to the other.

"Well, now, if you were just any citizen of the kingdom, I'd be bound not to tell you any news, now, wouldn't I? Because my loyalty's to the king. But if I remember rightly, you were knighted yourself by King Ruric, some years back, weren't you?"

"Yes, that's so."

"Well, then, you're one of us, aren't you? And you bow the knee to the king as well?"

"Yes, that's true. Though, to be fair, I never served here at the castle. When the king knighted me, I fear that it was only a ceremonial observance, designed to help ensure that a steady flow of tribute from Castle Thrail made its way regularly to Ruric's Keep."

Tiler grinned. "And that tribute has come steady, right?"

"Yes, as far as I know. Though I haven't visited my home in Castle Thrail in about three years, so I don't know for sure. But if my stewards are the men that I think they are, then we have contributed generously to the welfare of Ruric's Keep."

"Well, I'm satisfied—aren't you?" he said to Glassrood, who nodded affirmatively. "So you qualify to hear the news of the palace," he said to Roarke, "and here it is: There ain't none."

Roarke smiled, and Will chuckled.

"Actually," Tiler continued, "that's kind of news in itself. Usually, there's some kind of scuttlebutt or gossip floating through the walls, but right now the king's shut up tighter than a miser-man's purse. Him and Herm have been keeping their own counsel, ever since you came to the city."

Roarke and Will exchanged glances.

"The reason that Will and I are here today," Roarke said, "is that we wish you to deliver a gift to the king for us."

"Give it to Glassrood, here, and he'll take it right in."

"Can you remember a message to take along with the gift?" Roarke asked him.

"Yes, I've been trained to."

Roarke nodded his approval. "Here it is: The Lord Roarke of Thraill thanks His Majesty for the safety and prosperity of these last twenty years, and for the opportunity to give such humble gifts as Haioland has been able to produce. Now, the Lord Roarke of Blythecairne begs His Majesty to accept this first tribute from the land of Bretay, with hopes for many more years of friendship between His Majesty and his humble servant."

"Nicely said," Tiler approved.

"Thank you. Can you repeat it back to me?" Roarke asked Glassrood, and the young man did so, flawlessly. "Well done! Here is the gift for King Ruric." And he handed him the beautifully carved pipe he had purchased from Garnet the day before, along with twenty falconets in a leather pouch.

Roarke and Will passed the time chatting with Tiler, while Glassrood took the pipe and gold to present before the king. After half an hour had passed, the youth returned with a message, the king's reply.

"Ruric Serpent's-Bane, Sovereign of all Hagenspan, says to Roarke, Lord of Thrail: We are well pleased with your tribute these many years, and we remember the oath of fealty that you pledged to us. Ruric the King also says to Roarke, who would be Lord of Blythecairne: We will consider your claim to the lands of Meadling at the appointed time. But we command you to share the table with us tomorrow night, in recognition of the fine gift that you have sent us this day. If you have come with a company of your people, bring them all. We will feast in honor of Roarke, who has killed the serpent of Blythecairne."

Will said, "Well, *that* sounds pretty good."

Tiler agreed. "The king is rarely so generous with his favors."

Roarke smiled hesitantly. "We shall see. It sounds hopeful, I agree."



That evening at dinner, Hollie was assigned to work in another part of the dining room, and one of the dark-haired girls served Roarke and Willum. The meal for the two was a subdued affair; there was a certain level of excitement about dining tomorrow with the king, but it was dampened by the fact that both of them really wanted to spend another evening with Hollie. At least they did not have to eat mushroom soup.

Several times, as she was serving other tables, Hollie looked across the room, catching Roarke's eye, and smiling. He felt a feathery thrill in his chest at those moments, and thought to himself, *You foolish old goat. You're acting as if you were no older than Will.*

When the meal was nearly complete, and Roarke was starting to wistfully think about heading up to bed, Kenndt suddenly appeared at his shoulder, saying, "Good evening, my Lord. Enjoy your time spent with Hollie yesternight?"

"Yes, very much."

"Bidding isn't quite so brisk tonight. Only at three rurics, five maygrets so far."

Roarke felt a jolt of horror as he realized what Kenndt was saying. "Surely you wouldn't let her go for such a price?"

"Don't know. Haven't decided yet. Have before, from time to time."

Will looked at Roarke with a furrow of concern upon his brow.

Kenndt continued, "And since she didn't get worked last night, she's rested enough to go again tonight, I believe."

Roarke silently breathed red curses against the little man. "Five rurics," he bit out.

"I'll let you know," Kenndt said, disappearing back into the kitchen.

"How much money did we bring on this trip in all?" Roarke asked Willum. "I believe that damnable snake has it in his mind to take every maygret from our pack before we get shut of this place."

"Well," the boy replied, "I brought an awful lot of falconets, since I didn't know how long this adventure was goin' to last. We started out with one hundred. We changed some o' them back in Goric, ye remember, and we've spent a good bit o' that since then. But we still have eighty-four falconets, besides all the rurics and maygrets what's left over."

"Hmm, good. We may need to use a dreadful lot of that before we meet the king six weeks from now."

Kenndt reappeared, saying quietly, "Bid's now at five-and-two (meaning five rurics and two maygrets)."

Roarke grasped his shirtsleeve firmly and said, "If you'll end it now, I'll give you ten."

Kenndt laughed nervously. "For you, my Lord, I'll do it. My shirt, please—"

"One more question, first. The debt that Hollie's father owed you—how much was it?"

"Heh, heh. My Lord, that was many years ago. I'm afraid—"

"I feel quite sure that you know down to the last quarter of a maygret what that debt was."

"Yes, my Lord, of course—forgive me. It was seventy-five rurics."

Roarke's eyes blazed with indignation at the ferret-like man. "You have received from me twenty-two rurics, just in these two nights. How many times over has that debt been repaid!"

Kenndt spoke nothing, but smiled miserably back at the knight.

"Master Kenndt," Roarke said slowly, retaining his hold on the shirtsleeve, "I want you to work out the ransom for Hollie's freedom. I will pay whatever price you think is reasonable."

"My Hollie? You'd want to buy her, for yourself? Why, I don't think—"

"I will pay your price. Take a day or two, and think it over."

"All right, all right ... we'll see if we can work something out. But it won't be cheap, mind you!"

"I never doubted *that*. Two more conditions: Do not tell Hollie anything about this transaction. And *do not* sell her to any other man, until we have concluded our business, one way or the other."

The little man's eyes darted around the room, to Willum, to Roarke, to Hollie. "Can I still have her work the dining room?"

"All the better; that way, she won't wonder." Roarke released the man's sleeve. "Kenndt: Do *not* sell her to another man."

"No, no—"

"Or you will taste the blade that has killed three dragons."

Kenndt laughed nervously, and said, "Never fear, Lord Roarke. My word's good as gold."

"Thank you, Master Kenndt. Would you please send Hollie to join us at her earliest convenience?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

"My lord Cedric," Hollie said demurely, "it is a rare thing for someone to purchase my company two nights in a row."

Will said, "I don't believe *that!*"

Hollie laughed lightly and did not comment further. She was dressed in a different gown from the night before, and wore different jewelry, but she was every bit as lovely.

Roarke said softly, "I also have a hard time believing that, my lady."

"It's true. Seldom twice; never three nights in a row."

Neither Roarke nor Will could think of a proper way to answer.

Her face clouded briefly, and she asked, "May I speak openly, my lord?"

"Nothing would honor me more."

She took a deep breath, causing her chest to swell. Roarke struggled not to notice. "When men look at me, there is always lust in their eyes. When *you* look at me, Cedric, there is hunger, too, though not necessarily lust—or so I believe. Most of the time, though, it is naked lust."

She continued, "After a man has paid my price and exercised his desire upon me, I usually become an object of contempt to him. Instead of the tender feelings that he had imagined he would have for me, I become just another conquest, just another slave. Something that he had power over, something despicable. Occasionally, after they have professed how beautiful they find me, and then spent their passion, they reward me by beating me afterward."

Roarke's eyes saddened, his whole face showed his sorrow; he had never considered these things before. Will looked grimly at the table.

"Usually, the day after men have used me, they ignore me completely. Sometimes they jest about me with their companions, and slap me on the hindquarters when I walk past."

"Hollie, I'm sorry," Roarke said.

Remembering herself, she said, "Please forgive me! You have paid for my company tonight, and instead of giving you pleasure, I am causing you sorrow. I only spoke so openly, because ... after last night ... I thought perhaps you might understand. Kenndt would be angry if he knew I was speaking this way."

"Don't worry about Master Kenndt," Roarke said. "He needn't know what we have talked about."

"Thank you, my lord." She reached out and laid her hand upon his.

"Hey, what about me?" Will protested. "I ain't goin' to tell Kenndt neither!"

Hollie laughed musically and placed her other hand on Will's. Even though that was exactly what Will had hoped she'd do, he blushed deeply.

The rest of the evening passed swiftly, the three companions each enjoying themselves. Kenndt occasionally heard Hollie's dulcet laughter and cast a dark grimace in their direction, but they did not notice.

When it was nearly time for Hollie to be escorted back to her bedroom, she sighed wistfully, and said, "I surely will miss the two of you when you have to leave Ruric's Keep."

"Maybe ye won't miss us too much," Will said.

Roarke cast a warning look his way, and Will understood he had come close to revealing things Roarke was not yet ready to divulge.

Hollie, though, looked at Roarke with a question in her eyes.

"Well, the truth is, we may be here for some time," he attempted. "As long as six weeks, in fact."

"Six weeks? Why, that's wonderful," she said, and appeared to be genuinely happy. But then she suddenly understood whom it was she was seated with. There had been gossip in the kitchen, and between the serving girls, and the name of Roarke had been spoken. Nothing substantial was known about him, except that it was rumored he had killed a dragon in the north, and was ridiculously powerful and wealthy. There had even been whispers that perhaps King Ruric had requested him to come to the Keep in order to anoint him as his successor to the throne, though that seemed to contradict another story, which had King Ruric punishing Roarke by making him wait six weeks for an audience. Six weeks.

"My Lord Cedric," she said in a trembling voice, "are you ... Roarke?"

Roarke paused for a moment, then nodded his head slightly.

"You are Roarke, who has killed a dragon?"

"He's killed three of 'em," Will offered quietly.

"You are a Lord in the north country somewhere?"

"He's practically the ruler of the whole north of Hagenspan."

Roarke said quietly, "Will, please," and shook his head almost imperceptibly.

"My Lord, you have trifled with me," Hollie said, with a hurt look in her eyes.

"Never," Roarke said softly.

"It's true—he never would," Will affirmed.

"Then why did you not tell me who you were? I almost believed that you ... cared for me. No one in your station could possibly want someone like me for more than ... a dalliance." The wounded look did not leave her face. "My Lord, I may only be a slave and a— and a—"

"Hollie, forgive me," Roarke pleaded.

"Lord Roarke, am I free to leave the table?"

"May I escort you to—"

"I would prefer to leave, if I have your permission."

"Of course." He stood to let her pass.

She walked elegantly toward her stairwell, but her pace quickened as she drew near the steps, and when she reached the stairs, she ran the rest of the way to her room.

Will and Roarke watched in impotent dismay as she left. They both sighed, and then looked at each other, Will cocking an eyebrow at Roarke. They turned slowly and began trudging in the other direction toward their own room. Will said, "I stuck my foot in it tonight, didn't I?"

"It wasn't that bad."

"Do ye think she was cryin'?"

"Even prostitutes can cry, Will. And she's not just a prostitute, either. Inside her beats the heart of a lady. I think."

"Do ye think she'll see us again?"

"I don't know. Perhaps the purposes of God don't lead her in the same path as the one we're following." They entered their room, and began getting ready for bed.

"I hope so, though," Will said after a moment.

"So do I."

Chapter Twenty-Five

The next morning, as Will slept, Roarke again rose early, made his way down the stairs and through the kitchen, and found Kenndt leaning against the wall in the alley, smoking a morning pipe.

"Good morning, Master Kenndt," Roarke offered. "No *shegarro* today?"

"Ah, good morning, Lord Roarke," the innkeeper replied. "No hard feelings about last night, I take it?"

"No, none ... I apologize for my abrupt behavior."

"That's all right, all right. I'm a businessman, and I recognize that sometimes a cool head may be lost for a moment in the midst of negotiations. Better to back away from the table for a bit, and come back to it fresh another time."

"That's good ... thank you for understanding."

"Would you like some tobacco?"

"No. No, thank you. I rarely smoke before breakfast."

"Really? Can't do without it, myself. One of the few pleasures I allow myself."

The two men stood in the alley for a few minutes, wringing what warmth they could out of the pale autumn sun.

"About last night," Roarke began.

"Don't have a figure for you yet," Kenndt stated. "Been figuring up just what Hollie might be worth to me in lost income over, say, the next ten years."

"I understand. I just wanted to let you know that I was in earnest."

"Still are? It looked to me like you had a little, ah—shall we say—it looked like your evening ended abruptly last night."

"Well, yes," Roarke admitted ruefully. "She deduced who I was, and thought that I had been toying with her."

"May I speak frankly, Lord Roarke?"

"Please do."

"It seems to me as if you imagine yourself to be *courting* Hollie. Almost as if you wish her to fall in love with you. Now, don't get angry with me for this, but I'm going to tell you the truth about her." He looked at Roarke intently. "She's a whore. A trollop. She has been ... visited by, probably, *hundreds* of men in her life. The idea that she could fall in love with one of them, even so noble a personage as yourself, is the simplest folly. Don't mean to be cruel—but there it is."

Roarke realized miserably that Kenndt's words were probably true. His upper lip trembled briefly, and he formed his mouth into a tight grimace to still it.

Kenndt said diplomatically, "If you'd like to reconsider your offer of last night, I'll understand. Hollie would cost you ever so much in gold, and the fact is, I'd just as soon keep her. She makes me a nice living. And she ain't ever going to love you," he concluded kindly.

Roarke's answer came in a voice so low that Kenndt had to strain to hear it. "Whether Hollie ever loves me or not is immaterial. What matters is that I shall love *her*."

Kenndt had no answer for that.

Roarke thought for a moment, came to a decision.

"Master Kenndt, I should like to purchase Hollie's company for the entire day today, if she will consent to accompany me into the city." He drew a coin from his pouch. "Will this cover your loss?"

"Well! Falconet, isn't it? Haven't seen one of these in quite a long time. Yes, I should say—I could give Hollie the day off today, I expect."



Roarke knocked softly on the door to Hollie's chamber.

From within, he heard a muffled voice say, "It's not time yet. Go away."

He knocked again, patiently, heard the tossing aside of bedclothes, and the stamp of angry feet. Hollie threw open the door, with her blonde hair tousled and a hostile look on her face. When she saw Roarke in the hallway, though, she uttered a shriek, and slammed the door.

"What are *you* doing here?" she demanded from the other side.

"I require your attendance. I have purchased your cooperation for the day."

"You lie. Kenndt would never make me go for a whole day."

"Get dressed, please. I will go fetch Kenndt so that he can tell you himself."

"Lord Roarke! I can't!"

"Why not?"

She hesitated. "I only have the two dresses you've already seen me in, other than my working clothes." She paused again. "I told you last night ... nobody ever wanted me for three days in a row before."

"My lady Hollie. Our first stop today after breakfast will be to the clothier's, to buy you a new gown for this evening. Wear whatever makes you comfortable for the morning."

There was no response. "Hollie?"

A small voice answered, "Yes."

"Are you all right?"

No response. "Hollie?"

"I don't know why you're doing this."

"Shall I fetch Master Kenndt?"

A pause. "No."

"You'll be down to breakfast?"

Another, longer pause. A barely audible, "Yes."

"Come soon."

"All right."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Hollie descended the stairwell, wearing her black gown from two nights ago, and found that there were very few in the dining area this morning. She glanced around the room, but could not find Roarke. Willum quickly appeared at her elbow, though, and said, "Miss Hollie, may I escort ye t' yer table?"

She took the arm he offered and allowed herself to be led to the table that she had shared for the past two nights with Roarke and Will. Will held her chair for her, and then seated himself beside her. "Where's Lord Roarke?" she asked.

"He'll be right out."

She sat uncomfortably for a moment. She was dressed for the evening, and everyone in the dining room knew who she was. Why was she sitting at table, instead of serving? She felt the eyes of the patrons upon her, and imagined that their subdued conversations were about her.

Then Roarke appeared from the kitchen, wearing an apron and carrying plates of food. "Here are eggs, sausages, and toast," he said, setting plates in front of Will and Hollie. "Would you like tea this morning? Or I'm told that there is milk as well."

Hollie was unsure whether she was being mocked or honored, though she suspected that Roarke was trying to be kind. Her cheeks flushed bright red, and she said, "Lord Roarke, it is not proper that you should serve me. Please be seated, and I will serve."

"Nonsense. I command you to stay and eat your breakfast. I will be back to join you as soon as I have brought the tea."

Hollie saw Kenndt watching from the kitchen, and shot him a helpless look. He smiled at her and motioned for her to stay seated.

"Now, then," Roarke continued, "tea for you, or milk, Will?"

"Milk might be nice, for a change."

"And my lady Hollie?"

She bowed her head for a moment, then raised her eyes to fix her gaze upon Roarke's. They looked into each other's eyes long enough that Will began to feel a little uncomfortable—Hollie searching Roarke to see what his motivation might be, and Roarke staring back into her eyes of crystal blue and cherishing only the moment.

As hard as ever she might try, Hollie could discern nothing false behind Roarke's eyes, and for the second time in just a few hours, tears sprang to hers. She swallowed and said in a tight voice, "Tea, please."



An hour later, they were on their way to a tailor's shop that Hollie knew of; it was where she had been fitted for the two gowns that Kenndt had bought her last year. She walked arm-in-arm with Roarke, with Willum a step behind them. This arrangement was not entirely satisfactory for the boy.

As they walked through the streets, Hollie was very self-conscious. None of the women of Ruric's Keep appeared to recognize her, but several times men stopped with a jolt of recognition, gaping at her stupidly. She bowed her head, abashed. When Roarke noticed, he said to her in a quiet tone, "Hollie. Raise your eyes. Today you are a lady."

She did as he commanded, but thought to herself, *And what will I be tomorrow?*

At the tailor's shop, Roarke held the door for Hollie to enter, and politely asked Will to stand guard outside the door; then he followed Hollie into the shop.

Will thought dejectedly that it looked like Hollie was taking *his* place at Roarke's side, and that he—Will—was being consigned to a lesser position. He knew in his mind that Roarke would never do anything to intentionally exclude him, but that didn't ease the sting of rejection that he felt right now.

Once inside, Roarke addressed the proprietor of the shop, a white-haired lady who seemed to be extremely alert and intelligent. "Greetings. I fear that I have rather a large request of you."

"Happy to see if I can oblige you, sir. But isn't this Kenndt's Hollie?" she said, holding out her hands to the girl.

"Hello, Mara Dannat," she said, happy to see a friendly face. "Today, I am Roarke's Hollie."

"She is Hollie," Roarke said, mildly embarrassed.

"So you are Roarke," Mara Dannat mused, and studied him. "You have a date with King Ruric tonight, don't you?"

"My business no longer seems to be my own," he grumbled.

"You do?" Hollie asked, confused. "Then why—"

"I was going to get around to asking you sooner or later," Roarke said, his face turning crimson. "The king has ordered me to appear at his board this evening, and to bring with me anyone that is mine." He ducked his head, and concluded sheepishly, "I thought perhaps you would accompany me to the royal table."

Hollie stared at him, outraged, her mouth agape. "You want—"

Mara Dannat cut in smoothly, "And you need her to have a gown that is, let us say, not quite so nice as one of Queen Maygret's, but something that will make her ravishing to behold—is that it?"

"We have only a few hours before dinner. Can you do it?" Roarke asked.

"It is an easy thing to make Hollie beautiful, but it will require my complete attention. Will you pay for the rest of my day?"

"With a good will."

"Then get you out of here for four hours, and then come back to fetch your princess." She shooed him toward the door.

"Hollie, I'm sorry," Roarke pleaded. "I didn't mean—"

She picked up a slipper and hurled it at him, hitting him on the side of the head.

He ducked out the door, and called from outside, "We'll be back in four hours."

Rubbing his head, Roarke grimaced and said to Will, "Let's you and I pay a quick visit to a jeweler, and then get back to Kenndt's for a bit, and make ourselves presentable."

Inside the tailor's shop, Mara Dannat chided Hollie, "Why do you make the good gentleman suffer? He has paid you a great honor."

"He has?" she cried. "I'm a—" She composed herself, and lowered her voice. "I am a slave. How can Lord Roarke possibly think to present me before the king?"

"Judging by the look in his eyes, and the amount that he will be paying for your dress ... he will be presenting you as a lady."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Roarke had had Kenndt fetch a tub and fill it with hot water, so that he and Willum could bathe before meeting the king. This was the first complete bath that the two men had enjoyed since leaving Blythecairne, though they had both washed their faces and arms once or twice.

They wore the finest clothes that they had brought with them on the journey, which were still not at all ostentatious, but were at least clean and unstained. To cover the plainness of their garb, they donned capes of scarlet, which Roarke had bought impulsively as they left the marketplace that morning—one for each of them, including Hollie. He had also bought them each a necklace: simple finely woven chains of pale, nearly white gold, upon each of which hung a single brilliant ruby.

The two men strapped on their swords, and Roarke also placed the ruby-set circlet of Lord Meadling upon his brow. Will exclaimed, "Ye look fit to present to a king now!"

Next, the two retrieved Justice and Starlight from where they had been stabled, paying the livery-master a handsome tip for making ready the two horses. They also rented a black mare for Hollie, which they led back to Market Street and Mara Dannat's shop.

As they rode, the crowd dispersed to make way for them, men removing their caps, and women curtsying, as the people of the city became aware that, indeed, Roarke had come. "I guess that ends yer plan for stayin' hidden here at Ruric's Keep, don't it?" Will remarked.

"So it seems."

They continued picking their way slowly through the crowd, and here and there a man would shout, "Ho, Sir Roarke!" or "A cheer for the Dragon-Killer!" until at last the mob was fairly abuzz with the excitement of Roarke's presence. He felt keenly uncomfortable at the accolades, and he raised his hand to the crowd, both as a gesture of acknowledgement, and as a plea for restraint.

They reached Mara Dannat's, and Roarke left Will outside to hold the three horses, and he went in to retrieve Hollie. Finding the main room of the shop empty except for Mara Dannat herself, Roarke felt a brief stab of panic, which must have showed on his face, for the white-haired shop-keeper said, "Never fear, Lord Roarke. She is in the next room. A princess must make an entrance, must she not?"

Clapping her hands sharply, she cried, "Lady Hollie! Your escort has arrived."

Hollie stepped into the showroom, her eyes modestly downcast. She wore only a gown of iridescent white, completely unadorned with embroidery or jewel. The material, which appeared to be satin, shimmered like a pearl, throwing off different shades of gray, silver, pink, and purest white, as the light from the shop's candles played on it this way and that. But the simplicity of the gown only enhanced the beauty of the girl herself. She had been bathed and combed, and once again Roarke was stunned by her loveliness, imagining that her beauty must rival that of the very angels of God.

"My lady," Roarke whispered. He dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "You have undone me."

She walked over to where he knelt, and said, "Forgive me, my Lord, for my behavior earlier this day. Mara Dannat has corrected some of my wrong thinking, and has relieved some of my misgivings." She touched his face gently, and he reached up, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips.

Standing to his feet, Roarke said to the white-haired woman, "I thank you. I owe you for more than simply a dress, I see. She is ... transcendently lovely. You have done it, with the help of God, of course, who created such a face." He stopped. "Forgive me ... I ramble. May I ask, though? You knew that she was to meet the king himself tonight ... how is it that you have not adorned her with so much as a single jewel?"

Laying her hand on Roarke's arm, she laughed and said, "Silly man! *She* is the jewel!" She kissed Hollie on both cheeks, and said, "Besides, I was quite certain that *you* would choose to adorn her yourself."

His face reddening, Roarke said, "Am I so transparent?"

Mara Dannat reached up with both fists and grabbed Roarke's tunic, pulling his face down to her level. Then she kissed both of his cheeks, too, and whispered in his ear, "I told Hollie that, come whatever may tomorrow, she should enjoy this night. And I told her that if her Cedric were to bring her a gift tonight, she should be sure of his heart, and forego her fears." Releasing him from her grip, the little woman stepped back and said loudly, "Now! Do you have a gift for your lady?"

Somewhat disconcerted, Roarke produced a parcel, and opened it. He withdrew the scarlet cape, and said, "This is to keep you warm as we ride to the palace." To Mara Dannat he said, "Will you tie it on her?"

She said, "No, Lord Roarke. You do it."

Nodding slightly, he drew Hollie to himself, and draped the cloak across her shoulders. She had to tip her face upward as he fastened the knot beneath her chin, and she gazed steadily into his face as he worked with unsteady fingers.

"It is a very lovely cloak," she said softly. "Thank you."

"There is more," he said. Next he drew from the parcel the ruby necklace, which matched his own—which also matched the circlet on his brow.

Hollie drew a quick breath. "It's beautiful, my Lord!"

"I fear that your own beauty makes the stone look common," Roarke said, and again his cheeks flushed hotly beneath his silver beard. He fastened the clasp behind her neck, as she bowed her head toward his chest. After accomplishing that delicate task (to his great relief), he gently pulled her silken hair up through the chain so that it lay like a soft golden blanket upon the scarlet cape.

"Thank you," she again murmured.

"One more gift," he said, and drew from his pack a white gold circlet with one ruby, which he had purchased that afternoon along with the necklaces. He had paid a huge price for the crown, due to the shortness of the time he allowed the jeweler to fashion it, but he reasoned, as he placed it upon Hollie's head, that it had been well worth the cost.

"Well done!" cried Mara Dannat, clapping her hands gleefully. "Really, well done!"

Hollie, with tears staining her cheeks now, said, "Cedric ... I have no idea what you have planned for me, or whether you will abandon me to my bitter memories tomorrow. But for this moment, and the next ... I beg you to hold me in your arms."

Silently, he gathered her into his embrace, and held her there, breathing in the clean fragrance of her skin, and feeling the softness of her hair against his cheek. Almost as an afterthought, he murmured, "I nearly forgot. I have yet one more gift."

"No, my Lord. You have done too much," she protested.

"I have not done too much yet."

He reached into the pouch that hung inside his tunic, always close to his heart, and removed from next to the fragments of God's words one of the crystal vials of perfume that had once belonged to Lady Ileana Meadling of Blythecairne.

He asked Mara Dannat, "Have you ever seen one of these? Is it still safe to use?"

She replied, "It looks very old."

"It is. More than a century ago, it belonged to a great Lady—one whose family was killed by the dragon of Blythecairne."

"The fragrance should still be pure. But the only way to know for certain is to break the glass and see."

He hesitated. "Will you trust me, Hollie?"

She nodded.

Roarke asked Mara Dannat, "What's the proper way to do this?"

"Break it over her hair; that way the perfume won't be lost. And if somehow it has spoiled, we still have enough time to wash her hair."

"Would you like to do it?" Roarke offered the crystal to her.

"No, silly man. Hollie, bow your head. Lord Roarke, break the vial." Mara Dannat raised her hands as if in benediction, and prayed, "*From the last Lady of Blythecairne, through the hand of the deliverer of Blythecairne, and on to the next Lady of Blythecairne: May the chain be unbroken, and the fragrance sweet.*"

Roarke started as if frightened, and Hollie said in alarm, "What have you said?"

But Mara Dannat commanded, "Break the vial, Lord Roarke."

Pausing only briefly, Roarke snapped the glass between his fingers, and the perfume spilled out into Hollie's hair. At first, there was nothing noticeable, and Roarke feared that the fragrance had all dissipated. But after the briefest of moments, a soft bouquet began to permeate the air of the little shop. It was delicate and sweet and fragile and wistful, and made one long to hear birds singing in the lilac bushes as the first young rays of the springtime sun warmed the earth again after a biting cold winter.

Mara Dannat said, "Such are the ways of your God, Lord Roarke."

Roarke asked curiously, "You know of God?"

"Some little bit," she winked. "He has occasionally granted me the gift of foresight, in some matters either great or small."

"And you have foreseen this?"

"Partly. The Almighty led to me know that somehow, you and Hollie would impact the throne of Ruric's Keep. The rest, I read in your own eyes."

Hollie had stood silently, stunned at this exchange. "And what of me?" she asked helplessly. "Have I nothing to say about all these things?"

Mara Dannat said to her, kindly, "My dear. You are a slave, and may be either bought or sold. But let me ask you, since you apparently are unaware of the answer: Hasn't your heart already chosen for you?"

She blushed deeply, and bowed her head, without answering.

"Hollie," Roarke said, "this may solve another delicate issue about tonight, as well—a practical issue. I was ... unsure how you should be introduced to the king and queen. The decorum of the royal court, and all. May I please announce you as ... my betrothed?"

Feeling a small vestige of rebellion stirring defiantly in her breast, she said primly, "You may introduce me however you wish. I am yours, bought and paid for, at least for today."

Chagrined, Roarke began again. "Forgive me, my lady." He knelt at her feet and took her hands, bowing his head. "Hollie ... would you please do this foolish old man the honor of becoming my bride? I beg you."

She nearly relented, but stubbornly clung to whatever shred of independence she had been able to maintain during her lifetime of bondage. "You may ask me again one day, should I ever become a free woman."

Mara Dannat laughed gleefully.

His pride bruised, Roarke stood stiffly and said, "We had better be on our way to the palace. It won't do to keep the king waiting."

Feeling a pang of sorrow at seeing his discomfiture, Hollie said, "Cedric ... it would please me very much if you were to introduce me tonight as your betrothed."

"God bless you, my Lord, and my lady," Mara Dannat laughed, and pushed them toward the door.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Waiting beside the king's table were other guests of the crown: visiting Lords from Millen and Fralik, along with their families and retinues, who had just brought in their tributes of grain and produce following the harvest season. Roarke entered the cavernous dining hall with Hollie on his arm and Willum a step behind them, and the two other Lords greeted him warmly.

They stood for several minutes waiting for the king to appear, chatting innocuously. At last, luxurious drapes were parted by two servants, and six knights entered, followed by a man that could only be the king's advisor Herm, followed by none other than King Ruric, with Queen Maygret on his arm. Roarke had not seen the royal couple in over fifteen years, and was startled at the change in them. They seemed so frail, so white ... so small. *No doubt I've changed, too*, he mused, thinking about his own silver beard and smiling slightly.

"Ah, Lord Barsden," the king greeted the Lord of Fralik. "And Lord Callen," he noted the other. "Thank you for your offerings, and welcome to our table."

Ruric turned and fixed Roarke with his gaze. "And Roarke of Thrail. Many years have passed since last you set foot in the Keep."

"The fault is mine, Majesty," Roarke said. He drew his sword, knelt before the monarch, and presented the blade before him in the palms of his hands. "As long as I shall draw breath, you shall have the use of my right arm, and my knee bows to no other."

"Well said, Lord Roarke!" the old man cried. "But stand! We have gathered to honor *you* tonight!"

Queen Maygret spoke. "And it is good of you to have brought your son and daughter, so we may bless them."

"My apologies, Your Grace, but these are not my children," Roarke said smoothly. "Allow me to present to you my most honored and indispensable squire, Willum of Blythecairne." At that, Will made an awkward but sincere attempt to duplicate Roarke's presentation of his blade.

"Stand, young squire. If you have not skill, yet we perceive that you have spirit," the old king said.

"And this is the jewel of my heart—my betrothed, the Lady Hollie," Roarke said, taking her hand as she curtsyed before the queen.

"Indeed," Maygret said coldly.

"By God, Roarke, but she's a lovely," the king laughed his approval. "Never a courtesan did we have in this house that was any fairer. Congratulations to you, Dragon-Killer!"

At that, Maygret's cheeks flushed with anger, but she said nothing.



Prime Minister Herm sat at the table, seething with vitriol, temporarily displaced from King Ruric's right hand. Since the dinner that night was nominally in honor of Roarke, that silver-haired old fool had been granted the king's right hand.

For some reason, which was at the moment unknown to Herm, he hated Roarke. He hated him with a fiery violence that threatened to suffocate him. Nearly blind with rage, he nonetheless acted the part of a courtier with charm and elegance, albeit through clenched teeth. And there was something nauseous about that insipid wench Hollie, too, that made his nostrils flare and his upper lip curl

into a snarl, just barely able to be controlled. Something about her very *scent* was disgusting, revolting to Herm, in a way that made no rational sense.

For ten years Herm had been serving King Ruric, and for ten years he had had his eye on the throne of Hagenspan. Since Ruric had no natural heir, Herm had sought to ingratiate himself to the old man in every possible way, and had gained considerable favor in the king's court.

Not satisfied with the slow, steady progress that he actually was making, he had begun to dabble in the black arts. He had sought tutors who had experience with magic—in sorcery, enchantment, the occult. For five years he had toyed with spells and incantations, with potions and spirits, and had begun to exercise some middling amount of control over the king's decisions. Ruric's royal calendar was completely under Herm's jurisdiction now, and the king made few decisions, either personal or regal, without consulting his Minister. Of course, Ruric *was* a king in Hagenspan, so the Almighty did not allow his mind to be completely taken over by a lesser spirit.

Suddenly, though, about a year ago, Herm had become aware of a much greater power, which he imagined to be at his disposal. He was unsure what he had done to open the door to that potency, but he could feel it lying in his belly, quiescent, like some great malevolent force held in abeyance. He knew—he thought—that the power inside him was his to wield, and when its time was fully come, he would be able to bend the spiritual force within him into tangible strength.

He would be king.

For the present moment, though, all he knew was that he despised the man called Roarke, and that the woman called Hollie, though beautiful in a superficial way, made him ill.



The talk had died down at the dinner table, and the feasting had long since been completed. Wine and music and a short program by a jester had been concluded, and most of the dinner guests were beginning to secretly wish it were time to go off to their rooms and sleep.

Hollie had been able to make it through the meal without revealing any of her past that she wished to keep hidden, because the king insisted on making Roarke tell the stories of his battles with each of the three dragons. Ruric asked many questions, and appeared to be genuinely appreciative that Roarke had dispatched those three foul enemies of his kingdom.

At last, the king noticed one of his knights and the wife of Lord Callen asleep at the farther end of his table, and declared that, after one more item, the guests would be dismissed.

"Lord Roarke of Thrail," he pronounced, "it is not yet time to judge whether you shall be awarded the lands of Meadling. That time has already been set. But there has been no dispute that you have been a great friend of Hagenspan, and have killed three serpents that would no doubt have spoiled much of our fair kingdom. Now, we charge you, as your Sovereign: Tell us what we may do to reward you for your courage."

"There is a boon that Your Majesty might grant me," Roarke admitted.

"Name it," the king commanded.

"Tomorrow, I may have occasion to make a very large purchase here in Ruric's Keep, but it's possible that I may not have enough gold with me to complete the transaction. If Your Majesty would kindly grant me a loan, I will repay every maygret, with the king's interest, in either eglons from Thrail, or

falconets from Blythecairne, whichever Your Majesty desires—or both.

Repayment can be made as soon as messengers can be sent to my holdings."

"A simple request, and gladly granted. Herm, issue a notice of our consent to whatever bank Lord Roarke wishes to use."

Herm nodded grimly.

"And now, friends of Hagenspan," the king proclaimed, "good night."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Hollie had said goodnight to Roarke, and closed the door to her bedchamber. After the events of this incredible, confusing day, her room seemed very small, very familiar—comforting.

Her mind was still spinning with everything she had seen, felt, tasted, heard, sensed. As she undressed, she tried to sort out her thoughts, and place them in some kind of recognizable order, so that she wouldn't forget something she might need to know later. Underneath all of the scattered impressions, though, was a steady current of uneasiness—hope, mixed with fear—about her new and tenuous status as the betrothed of Lord Roarke ... Cedric. Had he been sincere about what he had said at Mara Dannat's, or had that just been a ruse for the king's sake? If it had been some sort of deception, then for what possible purpose? No, he had seemed to be genuine ... but then had *her* actions offended him? She castigated herself for having rebuffed him, when he had gotten down on his knees before her and begged her to become his bride. She made a small fist and punched her thigh. A Lord, on his knees, before *her*! What could she have been thinking? And when Cedric had left her at the door, moments ago, he had not tried to kiss her, or embrace her, or even kiss her hand. If anything, since he had proposed to her, he had become even more distant from her than he had already been.

She tried to think about something else. And in her mind she heard his voice, presenting her to Queen Maygret: "This is the jewel of my heart." Her own heart leaped in her breast as she remembered the words.... Mara Dannat had said, "Hasn't your heart already chosen for you?"

What if Cedric never dared to ask her again? What if he lost interest, and left her behind, with Kenndt? With Kenndt! She burst into tears at the thought.

She removed the pale gold circlet from her brow, and placed it on her dressing table. *My God! I have a crown!* she thought. She balled her hands into fists, thought about punching her thigh again, but instead brought them slowly up to her face, where she bowed her head, her lips touching her fingers ... like Cedric's had. Both Mara Dannat and Cedric had talked about God ... Hollie had not thought very much about God since she was a little girl. But now, she prayed. "God ... Cedric's God ... if you can hear me ... please ... I have been changed, these last three days ... please don't leave me here." She didn't know if that was a proper prayer or not, but decided it was the best she could do. Then she sat down on her bed, and cried.



Will felt as if he would burst, dying to ask Roarke the question that had been burning in his mind ever since Roarke had introduced Hollie to the queen. But he waited until they were both back in their room, with the door safely closed behind them.

"*Betrothed?*" he exclaimed. "When did *that* happen?"

"I'm sorry, Will, I should have told you. But the truth is, we never even breathed so much as a thought like that together, until you and I went to pick Hollie up at Mara Dannat's."

"Well, how'd she get to be yer betrothed? Did ye ask her right there at the tailor's shop?"

Roarke felt mildly embarrassed—a common enough reaction for him, these past few days. "I know it sounds a little peculiar ... but yes. And the fact is," he admitted, "I don't know if we're really betrothed or not."

"And what's *that* supposed to mean?"

Roarke looked slightly confused, as if he didn't actually know what it meant himself. "She allowed me to introduce her like that tonight. But she didn't actually accept my proposal. At least, I don't think she did."

"Well, what'd she say?"

"To ask her again if she was ever a free woman."

"Oh."

Will remained silent for several minutes. Then he said, "I been workin' on this."

"What's that?"

"If ye can actually buy Hollie from Kenndt, like ye said ye would ... then ye would own her. She wouldn't be free, but ye could keep her."

"Yes."

"And if ye bought her from Kenndt, and set her free ... then she'd be free, but ye might lose her."

"Yes."

"Lord Roarke?"

"Yes, Will."

"Ye'd better do yerself some more prayin'."



As Hollie lay beneath her quilts, waiting for sleep to claim her, she thought about the guests at the king's table. King Ruric himself had seemed quite kind. A little crude, perhaps, but he seemed to be good-hearted. Queen Maygret was something else, though; she seemed to be almost overtly hostile to both Roarke and Hollie. It was as if she were angry with Roarke for something.

The Lords Callen and Barsden were polite enough, but as the evening wore on, they seemed to grow resentful toward the king for paying so much attention to Roarke. Their wives asked Hollie small chit-chatty questions, but they clearly did not care what the answers were. The other retainers, and the king's knights that shared the table with them, were seated far enough away that Hollie really didn't have a chance to interact with them at all.

The Minister Herm, though—Hollie felt an involuntary shudder run through her body, in spite of the warmth of the quilts. She knew what it was like to be looked upon by lustful eyes. But when Herm had looked at her, she had felt such a mixture of loathing, even hatred, and yes, lust, that if she hadn't been sitting next to Roarke, she would have been terrified. She hoped that she would not have to meet him again.

But, she thought with a little thrill, she *had* been sitting next to Roarke ... Cedric. And he had been, even counting the king, the most interesting man there, the most quietly powerful, the most humble ... the kindest ... the.... She drifted off to sleep with a small sigh.



Roarke had just nodded off, when Will said to him through the darkness, "Ye know, the king wasn't really that bad. After the way ye'd described him, I thought he'd be a bloody bastard. But he was really rather nice."

"Yes, that was something, wasn't it?" Roarke yawned. "I seem to have misjudged him."

"The queen, though—she was a frosty one."

"Sleep, Will."

Chapter Thirty

Kenndt stood in the alley, smoking and pacing. He had already heard through his usual channels some of the events from the night before. One of the knights who had been seated at the king's table had recognized Hollie, and had come around before dawn to ask Kenndt how it was that one of his strumpets had become engaged to the Lord from Thrail.

Kenndt had been unsure how to respond to that revelation; something about it made him angry. But in any case, he expected that Roarke would be here in the alley this morning to see him.

So he was mildly surprised when the back door from the kitchen opened, and out stepped not Roarke, but Hollie.

"Hello, Kenndt," she greeted him tentatively.

"Morning, Hollie," he replied, bridling the anger that threatened to seep into his response. "Understand you had quite a day yesterday."

She didn't answer that. She clasped her hands behind her back, and stared at her feet.

He waited for her, expecting that she couldn't remain silent for very long, but she seemed to be struggling with her emotions, and unable to speak. Deciding to make it easier for her to begin, he offered, "Up kind of early, ain't you?"

"Oh, Kenndt," she sighed mournfully, and then began sobbing.

He put his arms around her—something he rarely did—and held her as she wept. His anger began to abate, and he fought against the feelings of tenderness that taunted him from the periphery of his soul. God, she smelled good.

"Kenndt, I've never asked you for very much, have I?" she said, as she disengaged herself from his embrace, and wiped her face with her sleeve.

"Not too much."

"You know I never asked you how much my father owed you. I always just obeyed what you told me to do."

"I know."

"Well, unless he owed you an *awful* lot of money ... I *must* have covered his debt by now, haven't I?" She looked at him sorrowfully.

"What are you asking, Hollie?" he asked, though he knew.

"Set me free, Kenndt," she begged. "Set me free."

"You know, I almost had half a mind to do it, when I heard you laughing at the table with old Roarke. But I don't know. I don't know." He stiffened his resolve. "Go on inside now, and get your face cleaned. You've got to serve the tables this afternoon." A thin, cold strand of latent cruelty made him say, "And who knows? You may have other duties to perform tonight."

Her face went ghostly white at that thought, and her eyes grew wide with dismay. "Kenndt—I won't do it," she said, her voice barely audible.

"What?"

She whispered, "I won't."

At that, he reached back and gave her a ringing slap that knocked her from her feet, and immediately raised an angry red welt on her face. Instantly regretting the fact that he had struck her, Kenndt bent down and helped her up.

Remembering the sword that had killed three dragons, he hissed, "If you tell Roarke that I hit you, I'll never let you go."

She looked at him through wounded eyes, and placed her hand upon her cheek, which felt hot to the touch. "Set me free, Kenndt."

"We'll see," he acquiesced. "I'll think about it."

When Roarke found Kenndt, still in the alley, about half an hour later, the innkeeper could still feel the sting in the palm of his hand from where he had struck Hollie.

"Master Kenndt," Roarke greeted him.

"Master Roarke," he replied cautiously.

"My friend," Roarke began, "our negotiations have become more complicated. Or perhaps they have become more simple. In any case, we need to bring this to a resolution." He breathed in deeply, exhaled slowly. "Have you come up with a price?"

"I have," Kenndt decided.

Roarke felt his heart beating in his chest. "Yes?"

"Told you it wouldn't be cheap."

"No."

"Won't waste your time with how I figured the price, but if you need to know it, I can lay it out for you."

"No—go ahead."

Kenndt looked at Roarke, and hated him, because he was going to take Hollie away. "Fifteen thousands rurics."

"Fifteen—?" Roarke coughed. "Fifteen thousand rurics?" he said incredulously. The figure was roughly equivalent to what a normal working man would take fifty years to earn, though Roarke did not know that at the moment. All he knew was that the figure was astronomical.

"Wouldn't want to quibble over the love of your life, would you?"

Roarke's face cleared—almost as if the sun were breaking through thick clouds—and a smile began to form on his lips. "Why, no!" he said, and he began to laugh. "Master Kenndt, you have a deal!" And he shook Kenndt's hand

vigorously, laughing all the while, until happy tears ran from the crinkled corners of his eyes.

And Kenndt wanted to say, "No! Wait! That's not enough!" But it was too late.

Chapter Thirty-One

Later that morning, Roarke and Kenndt went to the bank where Kenndt kept his money. Roarke presented the letter that Herm had drafted, which was sealed with the king's seal. Fifteen thousand rurics were credited to Kenndt's account, and a solicitor at the bank prepared the documents transferring ownership of Hollie from Kenndt to Roarke.

As they walked back to the Public House, they were in jovial spirits. Kenndt had largely recovered from his dismay at having lost Hollie; he *did* have a sizeable addition to his already ample fortune. He would never have to earn another maygret in his life if he didn't want to. Of course, he wanted to.

"Hate to interrupt your happy thoughts," Kenndt began.

Cautiously, Roarke replied, "What's on your mind?"

"Might wish to buy Hollie some clothing before we get back to my place. Won't do to have her running around the pub in her delicates."

Roarke stopped in the middle of the street, and looked at Kenndt, disbelieving. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you bought Hollie. Don't recall anything in our bargain about her wardrobe."

Roarke stood there, dumbstruck, staring at Kenndt. Realizing that he was not going to win this argument, he said, "If Hollie should wish to keep her two gowns and her jewelry, are they for sale?"

"Everything's for sale, my Lord."

"It seems so," he said dryly. "I'll let you know." While he had enjoyed buying Hollie the gown yesterday, Roarke was not thrilled by the idea of having to buy her more clothing today. Then he realized that it would give him an excuse to

visit Mara Dannat again, and he brightened considerably. "I guess we'll part company here, then, and I'll see you back at your place in a bit."

"Good, good," Kenndt said, smiling. "Are you planning on staying on at the pub, then?"

"I hadn't planned otherwise," Roarke replied, but he thought, *though perhaps I should have.*

"Then there's the matter of Hollie's lodging to consider."

Roarke understood immediately. "Since she no longer belongs to you, she must forfeit her room, too."

"Of course. She'll have to pay for a room, same's any other lodger."

"I'll take care of that when I get back from the market."

"No hurry, no hurry," Kenndt exclaimed magnanimously. "I know you're good for it."



"Lord Roarke!" Mara Dannat cried. "How good to see you again! Was last night a success?"

"Yes, it was, an unqualified triumph."

"What brings you back to see me so soon? Have you come to talk about God?"

"Not specifically, though I do want to hear what you know, and I'd like to talk with you at length sometime."

"Then what brings you to me?"

"I need some more clothes, for Hollie."

"Really?" she feigned surprise. "And just what do you need?"

"Well, three or four dresses, I suppose. And some shoes." He looked perplexed. "I don't remember just what all a lady *does* need. Can you help me?"

"So soon!" she cried, clapping her hands. "You need *everything* for her, don't you?" The diminutive lady seemed to be delighted at that prospect.

"Yes."

"You have purchased her from Master Kenndt, yes? Does she know?"

"No, not yet," Roarke replied. "Unless Kenndt has just told her." A dark look passed across Roarke's face at the thought of Kenndt, and Mara Dannat saw it.

She said, "You mustn't judge Master Kenndt too harshly, Cedric. He has played his part in the Almighty's great design, too."

Surprised at that statement, Roarke asked, "How is that?"

"Lord Roarke—Cedric—the purposes of the Almighty are not readily apparent to ones such as you or I. Our lives are bound to this earth—to our toil, to our families. But you must realize that He has goals and intentions that are far higher than the works of any one man's life, do you not?"

"Yes, I do believe that."

"And well you should. I told you yesterday that I had seen that you and Hollie had a part to play regarding the very throne of Hagenspan, did I not?"

He nodded.

She spoke slowly, as if to a child. "How do you think that Hollie has been preserved for you for all of these years?"

Roarke started to protest, but she stopped him. "Some would say Hollie's life has been ruined, but I tell you that it has been preserved. Who knows what would have happened to her, had she continued to live with her father, who was a scoundrel and a cad?" She patted Roarke's arm apologetically. "And you, my good man—you must not be too vain, either. You are a noble man and wealthy, and not displeasing to the eye. But surely you must know that if Hollie were a

normal young woman of such an age, she would certainly be married, to someone young and virile, with hair of black or brown instead of gray." She smiled up at him, and he felt humbled, diminished.

"Cheer up!" she cried. "Oh, cheer up, dear Cedric. For it has pleased the Almighty to grant you a young bride of exceptional beauty, at a time when many men of your age are dandling their grandchildren upon their knees. For I do have a precious secret to tell you, too." She beckoned with a crooked finger for him to bend down to her level. Whispering in his ear, she said, "Hollie *will* love you."

Feeling a lilt in his heart at those words, he tried to maintain a sober face, but could not help smiling foolishly. "Has God shown you that?"

"Ah, such secrets He has shown," she said, not answering his question. She continued matter-of-factly. "He told me to make an extra dress for Hollie last night, after you left. She will need much more, of course, but this will serve your purposes for today."

And she placed a parcel in his hands, and then laid a pair of slippers upon that. "Come and speak with me again, soon, Cedric. I must tell you about a place you should visit. But for now, you have a lady to attend."



Prime Minister Herm was in the lowest basement of the castle of Ruric's Keep. He was singing before a fire, which burned with a curious blue flame, due to the mixture of powders he had cast into it. The words he sang were arcane, and he was unsure what they meant in total, but his tutors had made it clear to him that they were words of great power. He was Herm the Magician, Herm the Bold, Herm the Magnificent.

As he sang, he visualized the destruction of Roarke; he *willed* the destruction of Roarke. And he felt the mysterious, maleficent power in his belly respond. His hatred for the silver-haired knight grew tenfold. And he remembered why he hated the scent that he had sniffed in the hair of the vile trollop Hollie—it was the same scent he had smelled upon the Lady of Blythecairne one hundred years ago, when he had tried in vain to wedge his head up the narrow stairwell where she had fled, weeping and pleading.

Terrified, Herm the Magician thought to himself, *Where did that thought come from?* He stopped singing, stopped casting powders into the fire. His arms shook. His mouth was dry, so very dry—and yet he seemed to be salivating. He ran from the dungeon room with a shriek.

As he scrambled up the narrow passageway, he took delight in how easily he fit up the stairwell, and he imagined himself cracking Hollie's bones between his teeth. Herm the Magician laughed, a cackling, maniacal howl. And Herm the Magician cried.



Kenndt knocked on the door to Hollie's room. She asked, "Who's there?"

"Kenndt, dearie."

"Go away."

He opened the door and let himself in. She sat on her bed. The wounded look still lingered in her eyes, and his handprint was still faintly visible upon her cheek.

"I said go away."

"Got some good news for you. Don't have to work the tables today." He smiled at her, and said, "That ain't all of it. You don't ever have to work the tables again."

Suspicious, she asked, "Why?"

He sat beside her on the bed and took her hands. "Decided to give you what you asked for. Your debt's been cancelled. I'm releasing you."

Hollie's face contorted as disbelief and hope and joy fought for the mastery of her emotions. "Really, Kenndt?" she whispered.

"Never lied to you, have I?" He patted her hands. "There, there ... it's all right. You're free."

"Oh, Kenndt!" she cried, and threw her arms around him. "Thank you. Thank you." She kissed his face. "Thank you so much." She clung to him, crying quietly.

Kenndt patted her shoulders. "Never misused you, have I?" he asked.

"No."

"Always treated you all right, haven't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, truth is, I'm going to miss you, Hollie."

Suddenly Hollie realized that she had no idea what was going to happen to her next. For fifteen years, she may not have been free, but she also had never had to fear what the day might bring. There had always been food enough, and a warm bed to retire to at the end of the day. There had been routine; there had been safety. In a certain sense, she had been admired.

Now she was about to be cast adrift into the wild uncertainty of ... love. And she was frightened. She clung to Kenndt tightly for a moment. And she said, "Now that I'm free, maybe I could just stay here, and serve the tables. But not the other."

Kenndt chuckled, and said uneasily, "Well, Hollie, that'd be fine with me, of course, but the plain fact is, maybe you're not quite free enough to do that."

She released him then, and looked at him curiously.

"You see, your friend the Lord Roarke and I, well, we decided that maybe it wasn't quite safe for you to be ... totally free. So he paid me a small sum, and I transferred the ownership of you to him."

"What kind of a small sum?" she demanded.

"Well, enough to make it legal."

Hollie's face clouded as she realized the significance of Kenndt's words. "Then ... I am not free," she said, confused and disappointed in spite of her recently felt fear.

"Well, no."

Kenndt smiled paternally and patted her hand. "You belong to Roarke now."

She looked at him and smiled faintly. He rose to go, and as he closed the door behind him, he chuckled softly.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Roarke knocked on Hollie's door, just moments after Kenndt's departure. She opened the door, assuming it would only be Roarke or Kenndt.

She looked up at him expressionlessly. Roarke was unsure of what to expect; her moods seemed to be rather ... unpredictable. She had just been a guest at the king's own table the previous night, and had been received as a Lady. Just a day ago, Roarke had knelt before her and begged her to be his bride. And she had occasionally shown signs of warmth toward Roarke, too ... but she seemed to be confused. In the few days Roarke had known her, she had vacillated between great tenderness toward the knight, and a distant coldness. And her apparent confusion confused Roarke.

"Yes, my Lord?" she asked, when he did not speak.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You must think me an imbecile. I have this for you." He handed her the parcel with the slippers. "It's from Mara Dannat."

"Thank you, my Lord," she said coolly.

"It's nearly dinner time," he continued nervously. "Would you please put it on—I haven't even seen it yet—and join me and Will at our table?"

"As you wish, my Lord."

"Thank you, Hollie. I ... have some important news for you."

"I shall see you at your table, then." She closed the door before he had a chance to continue.

Slightly annoyed, Roarke thought, *So it's going to be another one of those days.* Mara Dannat had said that Hollie would love him ... but she didn't say anything about how soon, or how much, or how hard it might be to convince *her* of that fact.

As he strode away, steeped in frustration, he thought to himself that the treatment he was receiving from Hollie wasn't exactly fair—certainly not justified. He had done nothing wrong, as far as he knew, but he was constantly receiving her cold shoulder.

Such is the nature of love, he reminded himself—to give, and demand nothing in return. Yes, but sometimes, it could be downright exhausting.



"So, did ye do it?" Will asked enthusiastically.

Roarke showed him the paper naming him as the owner of Hollie.

"Well, what d'ye know about that?"

Roarke smiled weakly.

"I've a question for ye, if ye're up to it." Will ventured.

Roarke nodded, the same smile still pasted upon his features, grateful to take his mind off Hollie for a moment.

"Well, I realize ye've got Hollie pretty well sewed up for yerself, so I aim to withdraw my claim on her," Will said with a mischievous grin. "So ... how about if ye buy another one o' Kenndt's girls for me?"

Roarke chuckled in spite of himself, and said, "You mean there are *other* girls who work here?"

"I know ye ain't seen it, bein' so moon-eyed over Hollie and all, but Shaeli, the one with the curly hair, she's been givin' me some looks."

"Oh, Will, Will, Will ... let me make this quick and painless," Roarke said with a sigh. "No."

"I expected as much," Willum replied, not really disappointed. "Guess I'll just have to go an' kill me a dragon o' my own."

"Well, there's still one at Beale's Keep for you," Roarke offered.

"So there is!"

Rising from his bed and straightening his tunic, Roarke said, "Come on, let's go down to dinner."

"Right with ye."

They stepped into the hallway, and closed the door behind them.

Roarke hesitated, and looked at his friend. "Will ... *don't* go to Beale's Keep."

"Never fear. I'll leave the dragon-killin' up to you." Will smiled, and looped his arm through Roarke's. "Besides, I'm less of the fightin' sort, and more of the brainy type."

Roarke laughed then, and pushed Will away. "Come, young squire, and let's be seated with our lady Hollie. Perhaps your Shaeli will be serving tonight."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Hollie descended her stairwell, wearing a simple gown of deep blue. Once again Mara Dannat had chosen brilliantly, the color of the fabric providing a contrast to the golden hair but highlighting the color of her eyes, and the simplicity of the design accentuating the remarkable beauty that Hollie had been given by her Creator.

The two men stood to allow her entrance. Roarke took her hand, murmured, "My lady," and helped her to sit. "Again, your beauty has overwhelmed me."

"Thank you, my Lord," she said, but did not smile, or meet his gaze.

"Hollie, ye're as lovely as anything I ever dreamed of," Will gushed.

At that she allowed herself a faint upturn of her lips. "Thank you, Will."

Roarke felt again the glacial distance between Hollie and himself, and decided to risk confronting this issue—whatever it was—rather than just continuing to endure Hollie's coldness. He had noticed the faint red mark on her cheek, and wondered if it had something to do with her attitude toward him.

"Hollie," he said softly, "what on earth is wrong?"

"What could you possibly mean, my Lord? Have I not done everything that I have been commanded?" she asked with barely concealed bitterness.

Roarke thought that he understood then, and chastised himself for not realizing it already. "Kenndt has told you about our transaction."

"Yes, he did mention something about a deal that the two of you made."

Roarke groaned inwardly. "I had hoped to find a graceful way to tell you myself ... what did he say?"

"That you had paid some small amount of money, and purchased me for yourself. When it had been in Kenndt's heart to set me free anyway."

Will blurted, "Some small amount?"

Roarke shook his head and motioned for Will to be still. He did not want Hollie to know what the purchase price had been, lest she feel obligated to him. When the time came for her to make her choice, he wanted to know that she was making it with complete freedom.

"Why? How much was it?" Hollie demanded, her cheeks flushed.

"I'd rather not say," Roarke answered quietly.

"As little as that? Are you ashamed to tell me how little I was worth to you?"

"Hollie, ye don't know what ye're sayin'," Will interjected.

"Will, *please*," Roarke cautioned.

Hollie gathered her resolve, and said, "Lord Roarke, until I met you, I never once entertained the hope for freedom. The thought never even entered my mind. But since I have come to know you, my entire life has been thrown up in the air and the pieces left to fall where they may." She looked at him earnestly. "The desire for freedom has become very—" she sought for the right word, "*urgent* to me. It's become a necessity, like air, or water. Or ... love. Now, I need to ask you this...."

He nodded dispiritedly.

"Do you intend to set me free, or am I yet a slave?"

He looked at her tenderly through troubled eyes. "Hollie, I am an old man, and I no longer fear very many things. But some things, still ... make my heart like to stop beating, all for spineless timidity." He paused. "Can you give me just a moment to think about it?"

"I am yours to command," she said pointedly.

At that moment, a slightly drunken patron of Kenndt's swayed over to where the three were seated, and addressed Roarke in a coarse whisper. "Say, Mister," he

began, thinking that he was being discreet, "Kenndt says the yellow-haired whore ain't his no more. That she's yours."

Hollie, who could hear his words clearly, blanched.

Roarke remained silent but stared back at the other man with icy fury in his eyes.

"How much to bed your whore tonight? I can go seven-and-four."

At that, Will leaped to his feet, grabbed the drunken man by his shirt, and roughly escorted him out of the pub, where he threw him into the street. "Talk about a lady *that* way!" he shouted.

Kenndt looked on with a derisive smile.

Will came back to the table, his head bowed apologetically. Hollie sat with her hands folded in her lap, an unreadable look upon her face, her eyes staring vacantly at nothing.

"Will, please go see Master Kenndt and ask him to lend us a pen," Roarke said.

A moment later, Will was back with a quill and a bottle of ink. Roarke took the paper granting the ownership of Hollie to him, and scratched out upon it: *I, Cedric Roarke, of Lauren, of Thrail, of Blythecairne, do hereby freely and without coercion grant the lady Hollie her unconditional and complete liberty.* He blew on the paper to dry the ink, read what he had written, and handed the document to Hollie. When she had read the words, she sighed. The stern set of her shoulders relaxed slightly, and she said, "Cedric ... thank you."

He nodded. When he had first begun to imagine the day that he would grant Hollie her freedom, he had hoped that it would be a cause for great rejoicing, but this had turned out to be a night full of difficulties, hard feelings and bitter humiliation.

"Cedric, this has been a draining day for me. May I please retire?"

"Without dinner?"

"I'll be all right."

"Why, of course, if that's your wish."

"It is."

"May I—"

"No, I'll just see myself to my room."

"Hollie," he began again.

"I have one more question," she interrupted, and Roarke could once more feel her growing distant, aloof.

"Yes, of course...."

"The gowns, and the jewelry that you have given me—are they mine?"

"Of course they are!"

"Thank you," she said primly. "Good night, to the both of you. And really—thank you both, so very much."

They stood as she departed, and once more they watched her go.

"Roarke?" Will began.

The knight just shook his head, waited until Hollie was out of his sight, and then trudged slowly up the other stairwell to his room. The fiery pain was back in his shoulders again.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Roarke slept very little that night.

Some moments, as he lay there staring into the blackness, he imagined that now that he had freed Hollie, she would end up rejecting him, no matter what Mara Dannat had said.

A moment later, he would remember what Hollie had said to him about asking her to marry again when she became a free woman, and he would be filled with hope.

He tried to pray.

His stomach hurt.

He would nod off for a few moments of fitful, unsatisfying sleep, dream terrible dreams, and then wake up in a sweat.

Then he would wonder what she was thinking, if she were still awake. Was she happy? Was she frightened? Was she thinking about him?

The pain in his stomach grew so intense that he could no longer lie on his bed straight out, but had to double up almost into a fetal position, just to get comfortable enough to drift back again for a few moments of troubled slumber.

And then he dreamed that a dragon was pursuing Hollie, and he was unable to do anything but look on. He would call out to warn her, but he had no voice, and he was forced to watch while—

Then he would wake up again with a start, his face wet with tears.

He tried to apply logic. What could it have meant when she asked whether the gowns and jewels were hers? He could think of no way that *that* could have been a good question.

What if this were all some elaborate hoax that Kenndt and Hollie had devised to extort him out of a fortune in rurics? Surely Mara Dannat would not have been a party to such a plan. Unless ... what if her "prophecy" was part of the deception?

He tried again to pray, but his mind was too full of his own imaginings.

After Roarke had given Hollie her freedom, when she was preparing to leave the table ... she had called him "Cedric" again, not the awkward, formal title of "Lord Roarke." It had seemed that she only used his given name when she was feeling less cantankerous toward him. Was that a good sign?

He moaned aloud into the darkness.

At last, he slept for a few hours.

He awakened to find it nearly dawn. His stomach still ached relentlessly, and he had a headache. But it was morning ... and he hoped.

Determined to find out how things stood, he dressed, walked briskly down the steps, crossed the long dining hall to the other stairwell, ascended the flight of stairs which led to Hollie's room—each step feeling like it was taking an eternity—and finally came to her door.

It was open.

She was not there, and her clothes appeared to be gone as well.

A moment later, Roarke found Kenndt in the alley.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"Gone."

"Where?" he repeated.

"Didn't say. Just gone."

"When?" Roarke asked weakly.

"Don't know." Kenndt pulled a *shegarro* out of his tunic, and offered it to Roarke. "Smoke?"

Roarke took the tobacco mutely, and lit it from the end of the *shegarro* that Kenndt was already smoking. "Thanks."

"Least I can do."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Queen Maygret went storming into her husband's private chamber without so much as asking for an audience with the king. "Do you know what he's done?" she cried in a shrill voice. "He has mocked you. He has mocked *me*! He has made the dignity of the king as nothing more than dung beneath the feet of your lowest servants!"

King Ruric, who recognized that his wife occasionally overreacted to things that he might consider trivial, said placatingly, "Who has mocked you?"

"Roarke! The Dragon-Killer!"

"Why, what's he done?"

"I am so angry that I can scarcely think straight!" she bleated. "Do you know what he's done?"

Ruric expelled a long-suffering sigh, and repeated, "No, I don't. What's he done?"

"That girl that he brought with him into your royal court! That obscene little trollop, that he introduced to you as his betrothed!" She wiped her mouth for fear that, in her rage, she might actually spit on the king, which was an inexcusable breach of decorum.

King Ruric had actually spent several pleasant moments daydreaming about the beautiful golden-haired maiden since his dinner two days ago. "What of her?" he asked diplomatically.

"She's nothing more than a common prostitute!"

This piqued the king's interest; perhaps he was overdue for a visit into the city. But he said, "How do you know this?"

"I *am* the queen, Ruric! I have ways of hearing things, just as you do!"

"There, Maygret," he soothed. "If it's true that Roarke brought a prostitute to present before us as his bride-to-be, then that is very curious indeed. I wonder what his reason could have possibly been? But in any event, what would you have me do?"

"Why, he needs to come back and appear before you again, doesn't he? To get the title for that little castle up north?" She hurled the words like a javelin.

"Deny him!"

"Hmm," the king considered. "What you suggest has some merit, perhaps. But he has killed the dragon and delivered the land; no one disputes that. What grounds could I use to deny his claim?"

"I don't care! Deny him! Tell him no!" she shouted.

"I will consider it," the king relented.

Thankfully, he saw Herm in the hallway, and called out to him. Turning to his wife, he said, "My dear, Herm has come, and we have business of the court to discuss."

Nodding her head in angry subjection, she retired from the king's chamber, giving Herm a searing look as she passed him.

"Your Majesty," Herm said deferentially.



"Herm, do you know anything about Roarke's woman being a prostitute?"

"It has been rumored," Herm admitted. "I did not wish to trouble Your Majesty with such a vulgar speculation."

"The queen wishes me to deny Roarke his claim to Blythecairne," he mused. "I can't think of a reason to do so, however." Ruric looked intently at Herm. "Can you?"

"May I speak openly before Your Majesty?"

"I command you to."

"There is the matter of the very throne itself."

At that, Ruric's attention, which had been partially distracted by the memory of the blonde-haired wench, came entirely into focus. "What do you mean?"

"Hear me out, Majesty. Just one of these factors by itself may seem to be a little thing, but taken all together, they do portend much."

"Proceed."

Herm the Magician fixed his eyes upon the king's, and he began to recite, unblinking.

"If Your Majesty grants Blythecairne to Lord Roarke, then Roarke will exercise some bit of authority over practically the entire northern one-third of Hagenspan." This was scarcely true, but Herm's fragile but growing control over the king's mind made it sound convincing.

"Go on."

"I have heard that the people of your own city, of Ruric's Keep, have raised a cry to honor Roarke, since they think that he has killed a dragon." In fact, this had happened only one time, with one small knot of commoners, but Ruric had already heard of it too, and Herm willed him to believe that it was a general clamor from his subjects.

He continued, "Forgive me for saying so, but Your Majesty must one day go and rest with your fathers, and Your Majesty has no heir. Is it possible, perhaps, that Roarke desires the throne?"

This was a false move on Herm's part, for the king's impending mortality, rather than making Ruric even more vain, tended to make him sober and reflective. "It's possible that Roarke aspires to the throne, yes. But perhaps he would be a good king—"

Herm, sensing that he was not succeeding as well as he had hoped, countered. "But would it not be more appropriate for Your Majesty to appoint the successor of your own choosing, rather than letting some ruffian from the north take the throne by force?"

"By force, you say?"

"Has Your Majesty heard how much the sum of the loan was that Roarke desired of you?"

"No...."

"I have just heard from the bank; he has drawn fifteen thousands rurics."

"Fifteen thousand! We had thought he was asking for a few hundred!"

"Think of the size of the army you could equip for that much money."

"Yes...."

Herm had one more insinuation to make before delivering his summation.

"Do you not find it unusual, even striking, that a formerly good and noble man like the Lord Roarke would attempt to mock Your Majesty by presenting before him a common harlot as his bride?" The king nodded, lost in thought. "I believe that the woman, who is admittedly beautiful, has enchanted the poor fool, with some foul and evil witchcraft, and that the designs on Your Majesty's throne ... may come from her."

"From *her*!" King Ruric said, completely appalled.

"It would be bad enough if Lord Roarke would have simply waited until Your Majesty's time had come, and then ridden in to claim the throne of Hagenspan."

"Foul villain," the king muttered.

"But to think that he plans to come leading all of the terrible armies of the north, with his beautiful witch-bride at his right hand, enchanting even the noble people of Ruric's Keep—spoiling, destroying, overpowering your house, and

taking your kingdom by force!" Herm the Magician gathered all of his remaining strength of will and propelled it forcefully toward the king. "Your Majesty, let it not be!"

"Curse the foul bastard, and curse the day his mother gave him birth," the king said vengefully. "It shall not be!"

"Let it not be," Herm repeated hypnotically.

"It shall not be!"

"Let it not be...."

"It shall not be."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Roarke sat on the edge of his bed for a long time, silently pondering the boards that made up the floor of his room. He studied the grain of the wood, noted the different shades of brown, looked mutely at the design of a large black knot near where one of his boots lay on its side.

Will had tried to initiate conversation with him a couple of times, but the answers he elicited were so distracted and dejected that he soon gave up.

"Roarke ... it's about time for luncheon," he said at last.

"Oh?" The old knight lifted his tired eyes and looked at the boy.

"Will ye come down with me?" Willum asked.

"No, you go ahead," he said slowly. "I don't feel as if I could eat, just yet."

"Ye'll be all right?" Will asked tenderly.

Roarke managed a feeble smile, and said, "I'm sorry about this morning. I'll be all right. Let me just spend a quiet hour alone here, praying, and I'm sure I'll be all right." His smile faded; the muscles in his cheeks were too tired to maintain it. "I've been a fool. I'm sorry, Will—I've not been much of an example for you." He drew a deep breath. "But, then, I've been a fool before. You just go on down and enjoy your meal, and the Almighty and I will work out my repentance."

"It seems to me," Will said gently, "—though I don't know too much on the subject—it seems to me that a man might be allowed to be foolish once or twice in his life, about love."

"Thank you, Will. Just give me a few moments, and perhaps I'll join you."

"Sure ye'll be all right?"

"I'm sure. Thank you," he said again.

"All right, then." Will closed the door softly behind him, and went down the stairs. But instead of stopping at the dining room, he kept on going out the door, and started toward the marketplace.



Roarke prayed. "What an idiot I've become, in just the space of a week. God, forgive me. Whatever dignity I had among men, I've abandoned. And what are they going to think at Blythecairne or Thraill, when the king's messengers arrive demanding repayment of the king's loan?"

He stopped, feeling vaguely that he was not praying correctly. He remembered Mara Dannat's words to him. She had said that God had revealed things to her, including the fact that it was part of the design of the Almighty that Roarke and Hollie would be united. "If that's true ... then I should not be apologizing to You for falling in love with Hollie. I should be apologizing to You because in the face of these small difficulties, I have lost hope, instead of continuing to trust the Hand of Providence that has led me thus far."

He considered for a moment whether he really trusted Mara Dannat, and the things she had shared with him. "I'd be a fool to just blindly trust every person who came up to me and said that she had a message from God for me." Then he brightened a little. "But, Will reminded me just a moment ago that even I had the right to be a fool once or twice. I'm sure You agree with *that*, God."

Roarke scratched his beard reflectively, and yawned. He stretched his arms wide and yawned again. He decided to go down and have lunch with Will. "Lord God, King of the Heavens, I remain Your humble servant. I renew my resolve to love as much as I can, and forgive whenever I have cause. Whether You ever

allow my eyes to see Hollie again or not, I commit myself to Your purposes, and place my life in Your hands."

He stood and made his way to the door. "Please ... if I have any say in the matter ... do let me see Hollie again." He paused at the door, with his hand on the latch. He breathed for a moment, filling his lungs with God's air, and rested his forehead against the door. To an onlooker it would have appeared as if he were waiting for something, but if he sought an answer, he heard none. Resolving again to trust, he said, "Thank you," and went down to find Will.



After a couple of wrong turns, Will found his way to the tailor's shop where Roarke had purchased the dress for Hollie. He wondered whether he should knock at the door, then decided to try the latch.

Hesitantly, he poked his head into the showroom, and said, "Hello? Anybody here?"

The little white-haired woman who owned the shop bustled out from an adjoining room and said, "Yes! You have come!"

"Do ye know who I am?" Will asked curiously, stepping into the shop.

"You are Cedric's young man, are you not? Has he come?"

"No. I mean, yes, that's me, but no, he ain't here—just me."

"Oh, dear," she worried. "That's bad, quite possibly. Oh, I know so little!"

"What's the matter?" Will asked with alarm.

"Cedric may be in great danger. Ah, the purposes of the Holy One ... are they cast in stone, or in sand?"

Not knowing what she meant by those words, but understanding the part about great danger, Will turned to run out the door.

"Stop!" the white-haired woman cried. "Stop, young squire, you cannot go that way!"

"Ye just said that Roarke needs me!" Will answered defiantly.

"No. I said he may be in danger! You cannot help him this time."

"Well, I might not be able to help him, but I got to try!"

"No, you must not," she commanded. "Your path lies in another direction right now."

Confused, Will said, "What d'ye mean?"

"You must take Hollie and flee to the Amendicarii."

"Hollie? Do ye know where she is?"

"Yes, she's here. She came to me during the night."

"Is she all right? Why'd she run away?"

"She's fine, just confused. Young man, do not stray from the point." She grabbed his hands and made him focus on her. "You two must flee to Mount Tendor, to the home of the Amendicarii."

"Who's he?"

"Not he—they. They are servants of Iesuchristi, monks who live on Mount Tendor, to the southeast. I had hoped to send Cedric there too, but perhaps it is not to be."

"Can't I go back and get him, and then have all three of us go to the Mendercareys?" Will pled.

"No, you and Hollie must flee—of that I am sure. I will go to Cedric, and if he is able, I will send him to join you."

The need to make a desperate decision threatened to tear Willum in two. Finally, he said, "What ye say may be right, and maybe I ought to listen to ye and take Hollie to the mountain. But one thing I know is this: I owe it to Roarke to at

least go back an' try to help him. If what ye say is true, an' I can't help him—if I can make it here safe again, then I'll take Hollie away like ye want."

Hollie appeared then at the door from the other room, and said, "Yes, Will, go to Cedric."

"Hi, Hollie," Will greeted her. To the little white-haired woman, he said, "If ye would, I'd appreciate ye sayin' a prayer to God on my behalf."

"Go, if you must!" the woman scolded angrily. "Come back, if you can! I will pray."

Will ran out the door and back through the market toward Kenndt's.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Roarke descended the stairs, looked around the dining room, and was surprised to see no sign of Willum. Perhaps he had needed to make a visit to the privy. Roarke seated himself at their usual table, and the curly-haired servant girl named Shaeli came to ask if he would like a cup of tea.

"Yes, thank you," Roarke said, and realized that he was actually quite hungry. "Do you know where my friend Will has gone?"

She replied, "No, m'Lord. Haven't seen Will today." She had a sweet voice and a gentle smile; Roarke could see why Will fancied her.

At that moment, Roarke heard a clatter and a crash from within the kitchen, and an angry shout, quickly muffled. Stepping through the main door from the street into the dining area came two of the king's knights, fully dressed for battle. A moment later, two more knights, similarly garbed, came through the door from the kitchen, blocking off all avenues of escape for whomever it was that they sought.

Kenndt, who had been seated at one of the tables chatting with a customer, stood tremulously. Roarke also stood, and reached reflexively to his hip for his sword, which was not there.

One of the knights—Roarke recognized his face from the dinner at the palace; he was the captain of the king's guard—announced, "Begging your pardon, Master Kenndt, but we've a warrant to arrest some folk what were reputed to be staying here." He looked nervously at Roarke.

"And who would they be?" Kenndt asked defensively.

The knight, reading from a small scroll, said, "King Ruric, Sovereign Monarch of Hagenspan, hereto demands the immediate and complete surrender of

these following citizens, about whom a charge of sedition against the throne has been made, for the purpose of offering their defenses before His Majesty, namely: the witch known as Hollie, the rogue knight called Roarke, and Roarke's squire, name unknown. Signed by the hand of Herm, the King's Prime Minister."

"Hollie's gone," Kenndt said flatly.

"Sir Roarke, will you come peaceably?" the knight asked, acknowledging that he had recognized him.

"I can't see that I have much choice about it," Roarke said guardedly. "As you can see, I have no weapon."

"What about your squire?"

"I'm afraid I don't know where he's gone."

"That seems unlikely," the knight said severely.

"No, it's true," Shaeli said. "He don't."

The knight looked like he was infuriated that the girl had dared to address him, but asked the other people in the room, "Do any of you know where Roarke's squire or the witch have gone?"

When none of them spoke, the knight said to Roarke, "Come along, then."

Roarke stepped toward the little cluster of knights, and wondered to himself whether he would ever see Hollie *or* Will again. The knights backed up to let him pass, and he briefly wondered if he should try to run, but when he stepped through the door, he saw that there were eight more armed soldiers waiting outside for him.

"Rather a large contingent for one old man, isn't it?" he murmured.

"Not so many for a dragon-killer and a witch, though," the knight in charge replied.



Will had drawn up and hidden himself among the crowd of curious onlookers when he saw the eight knights waiting outside Kenndt's with swords drawn. He watched as Roarke was led down the street toward the castle, surrounded by armed soldiers. He thought irrationally how unfortunate it was that Roarke didn't have his cape with him, and hoped that he would not catch a cold.

After the knights had departed with Roarke, Will scampered surreptitiously to the stable to fetch Starlight and Justice. He handed the liveryman a falconet, thanking him for the excellent care he had taken of the horses, and then gave him another falconet, asking him not to tell anyone that Will had taken the horses and left.

A few minutes later, he was at the tailor's shop, shouting down from Starlight, "Seamstress woman! I've come for Miss Hollie!"

The little white-haired woman came out then, leading someone dressed in bulky men's clothing, including a hooded cape, but to Will's eye, it was unmistakably Hollie.

"Up on Justice, Miss Hollie," Will said kindly, as he held the reins. "Does she know where we're going, Missus?" he asked the tailor.

"Yes."

"Goodbye, Mara Dannat," Hollie said, and even though her face was shrouded by the hood, Will could tell that she was in tears.

"Goodbye, my dear," Mara Dannat replied. "Mayhap that God will allow us to meet again—but if not, hold on strong to love." She patted Hollie on the leg.

"Thankee for yer help, Missus," Willum said.

"You are welcome, young man." She looked up at him intently, and gave him one final command. "You must be very brave, now."

"I will if I can be," Will said humbly.

"I know you will," she affirmed, and patted him on the leg too. "Now be on your way! Swift and silent, and stop for no one until you reach the Amencarii."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

King Ruric sat on his royal throne, with Queen Maygret seated at his side on a similar but lesser chair. The minister Herm stood at his right hand, holding several scrolls and wearing a concerned look on his face. Roarke stood before them, still surrounded by the dozen knights who had escorted him from Kenndt's Public House. He was angry, but recognized his helpless position.

"Lord Roarke—how good of you to attend," began the king.

"I am at your service, Your Majesty," Roarke replied, and knelt before the throne, bowing his head.

"Where are your companions?"

"I confess truthfully, Sire, that I do not know."

"Hmm, yes. We expect that you truly do *not* know. Now." The king spoke with dry sarcasm. "But when we sent our men to request your attendance before us, did you know then?"

"No, Highness."

"Stand to your feet," the king ordered irascibly. "We grow tired of staring at the top of your head, and straining our ears to hear your replies."

"As you wish, Your Majesty." Roarke rose, ignoring a sharp twinge in his right knee.

"Better," said the king. "Now, are you prepared to answer the charge that has been made against you?"

"I do not know of any charge, Your Majesty, but I will answer truthfully whatsoever question you put to me."

"Sir Keltur," the king addressed the knight who had led Roarke's escort, "did you not read the indictment when you apprehended Lord Roarke?"

"Yes, Majesty."

"Then you have heard the accusation already, and you have played false with us," the king answered severely.

"Forgive me, Sire—what I meant to say—"

"Keep silent before the king until he addresses you!" barked Prime Minister Herm.

Roarke closed his mouth and waited, but his eyes blazed with fury against Herm. He thought he had a pretty good idea where the accusation may have come from.

King Ruric said, "Herm, since our friend Lord Roarke pleads ignorance of his crime, please recount to him what has been reported to our royal ear."

"Lord Roarke," Herm pronounced, "You are charged with plotting to overthrow the throne of Hagenspan, by the following means: Bringing a witch before the king to attempt to enchant him. Taking money from the king's treasury to fund a seditious army. Falsely claiming to have killed a dragon in the lands called Meadling, in order to cement your authority in the rebellious north. Attempting to incite a riot here in the king's city in order to subvert the king's authority."

Roarke stood in mute disbelief.

"How do you answer?" Herm demanded.

"Who has made these absurd charges?" Roarke asked.

Herm snapped, "It matters not! You must answer these accusations before the king himself, who is the one aggrieved."

"Your Majesty, may I speak freely?"

The king nodded.

"The only reason that I am in Ruric's Keep is to apply for the lands of Meadling, including Castle Blythecairne, where I did indeed kill a dragon, just

over a year ago. Your Majesty knows already of the other two dragons I killed, and also the fact that I already have all the riches a man could ever desire, at Castle Thrail in Haioland. What possible reason would I have to try and deceive Your Majesty?"

The king looked momentarily uncertain, and Herm said to him in a low voice, "The throne."

At that, King Ruric nodded again, and said, "You may have riches aplenty, but what man does not desire more power? If you had indeed decided upon revolt as your course, what better plan than to unite all of the north against me?"

"Your Majesty—all of the north? I have two small castles in two largely uninhabited lands. There are entire cities in my realms who have scarcely even heard of me!"

The king stared back at Roarke, silently pondering his words.

"And what of the other charges?" Herm interjected.

"I will address them," Roarke answered. "First of all, the Lady Hollie is no witch. She is just a young woman, whom I met here in Ruric's Keep and with whom I fell in love." Roarke's face reddened at this confession. "The money I borrowed from the king was to make a purchase here in your city. It was completely unrelated to weapons, warfare, or the crown. I pledge my life that it is true. As for the other charge—I've forgotten what it was."

"The riot in the city," reminded Herm.

"There was no riot. Some of the king's people raised a cheer for me because they had heard I had killed the dragon."

Queen Maygret had remained silent during all of the proceedings, but now she raised her voice. "You have mocked your king. Whether witch or no, we care not. But the woman you brought and presented as your betrothed was nothing more than a common harlot."

Roarke bowed toward Maygret, and said humbly, "Your Highness. It is true that Hollie was a harlot—but common? No, never."

This made her even more angry than she had already been, and she demanded, "And what of the money you took from the king? A small loan, you would have had us believe, but you withdrew a fortune!"

"Your Highness—"

"Just what *did* you buy with that money? Where is it? Show it to us, and prove your words are true!"

Roarke hesitated.

King Ruric commented, "What the queen has required of you is eminently reasonable. Produce what you have purchased for fifteen thousand rurics, and show yourself a true man."

Roarke answered then, "The Lady Hollie, whom I love, was the slave of Master Kenndt, of Kenndt's Public House. She was a prostitute because he forced her to be so. I purchased her freedom with that money."

There was a moment of silence while the king considered this. "If this is a true story, it is easily verifiable. Sir Tiler—" he addressed one of the knights of the twelve, "—go and fetch this Kenndt, and bring him before us for his testimony."

"Yes, Majesty," Tiler replied, turned sharply, and left.

"The charge about the riot in the city, we dismiss," the king decreed. "We find it easy enough to believe that the unwashed mob would raise a cheer for the Dragon-Killer."

"Then, Your Majesty, what charge is left against me?" Roarke asked.

Again, a momentary confusion clouded the king's eyes, as if he had forgotten why they were there.

"Has he *really* killed a dragon at Blythecairne?" insinuated Herm.

"Ah, yes. Lord Roarke?" the king said.

"Yes, Your Majesty, I have," Roarke stated simply.

"Then," Herm said, "he must have kept some kind of token or charm from the foul beast to present to the king as proof, must he not?"

"What of that?" the king asked. "It seems to be a reasonable request."

Roarke said regretfully, "No, Your Majesty, I have not. I ordered the dragon destroyed."

"How convenient," Herm murmured, just loudly enough so that the king could hear it.

"Then ... we are at an impasse," the king decided. "The import of the charge against you—that you were planning seditious acts against the crown—demands that these accusations not be taken lightly. At the same time, we are nearly compelled to believe that you are an honest, if foolish, old man."

"Your Majesty ... if I *could* produce a token from the dragon, would that be enough to secure your pardon?" Roarke ventured.

"How would you do this?"

"The bones of the dragon are buried in the courtyard at Castle Blythecairne. If I could return there and dig up the beast, I could return with something. Some teeth, perhaps, or whatever Your Majesty would desire."

Herm broke in, "Majesty, if you were to release this man, how would you be certain of his return? He was planning murder! Your law demands that he be imprisoned until the tokens can be presented."

"Then how would he retrieve them?" King Ruric asked.

"Let us send one of your trusted knights—Sir Tiler, perhaps—to Blythecairne, and he will oversee the excavation of the beast. That way, it will also be certain that they don't try to substitute some *other* tokens than what Lord Roarke claims is buried in his courtyard."

"Yes, that's a good thought," the king agreed.

"Your Majesty!" Roarke protested. "I have done nothing worthy of prison!"

"Our law is our law," the king responded. "Here is my judgment in this matter: About the riot, we have already dismissed. About the woman and the loan, if Kenndt's testimony proves your words to be true, we shall forgive.

"But about the dragon and the matter of Castle Blythecairne and the lands of Meadling, we will reserve our opinion until a token from the beast is either received, or five more weeks have passed. At the time originally set for Lord Roarke to present his request to us, we shall see him here again, with or without tokens from the dragon.

"If you can present before us tangible proof that you have indeed killed the dragon, you will be awarded all the lands of Meadling, along with our apology and gratitude. If, however, you have nothing to present, you shall immediately be executed, as a seditionist and traitor to the crown.

"This is a severe justice, we realize, but if you are a true man, then we will reward you with generous mercy." The king stood then, held his hand out to Queen Maygret, who rose with an angry but silent snarl playing upon her lip, and the royal couple departed.

Prime Minister Herm said, "The king has spoken," and ordered the guards to take Roarke to a dungeon cell. He smiled triumphantly at Roarke, with malice unhidden.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Roarke had spent the evening, the night, and the morning in a cold, iron-barred cell in the damp basement of the castle, one level above the hidden chamber where Herm practiced his sorceries. He had not been fed, and he had been given no blanket to cover himself. He knew that he would not survive five weeks of this treatment. He would not survive five *days* if he were given no food. He shivered miserably, seated on the floor with his back against the stone exterior wall. His empty belly tightened into a knot; he had been hungry an entire day ago.

Somewhat surprisingly, he was content. He had cast his fortunes upon the great sea of the Almighty's providence, and he was willing to see the Hand of Deliverance move on his behalf. Or not. He thought calmly that, perhaps, this would be his end. At least he had purchased the freedom of Hollie, his beloved, and for a few brief moments, drunk deeply of the beauty of her face. If that should be all that there was ... it was enough.

He reminisced for a moment about the softness of her cheeks, and regretted that he had never been so bold as to press his lips against one of them. He scarcely dared to even think about the tenderness of her lips....

He resolved that, if he should somehow be freed, he would find Hollie again, and if nothing else, he would at least kiss her. And if he never saw her again ... then he still had the vision of that lovely face, which he had painted like a portrait upon the canvas of his memory, stroke by stroke, as he had studied her from across the table at Kenndt's. He closed his eyes, and breathed a prayer of thanks.

After awhile he heard steps on the stones of the hallway, and slowly stood. It was Sir Tiler, and he brought with him a steaming bowl of venison stew.

"Sir Roarke," the old knight greeted him, "I regret the treatment that you've received. I believe that Herm desires to humble you."

"Thank you, Sir Tiler—I am famished." His arms trembled as he held the bowl, and drank the broth. Tears sprang to his eyes unbidden, as the simple stew, to his hungry tongue, tasted far better than the king's feast had tasted just days ago.

Tiler waited patiently as Roarke finished his meal, even licking the bowl. Then he said, "I must confess, I was sore disappointed when I heard you was an insurrectionist against the king. But after I heard the trial yesterday, I decided that you really weren't." He cocked a bushy eyebrow. "You're not, are you?"

"No, my friend," Roarke answered, handing the bowl back through the grate to Tiler, and licking his moustache. "I fear that someone has begun a lie to discredit me."

"Well." Tiler looked uneasily around him. His voice dropped to a whisper. "It's Herm, if you want my opinion. But I must be careful. I believe he can hear anything said in the palace, just about."

Roarke nodded.

Tiler raised his voice again, continuing in a tone that was perhaps just a bit too hearty. "I'll be off, with morning light, to visit your Blythecairne Castle and bring back some dragon scales. I should be back long before your five weeks is up." He handed his cloak through the grate to Roarke, and whispered, "Here—wrap yourself in this. It's better than nothing."

Roarke whispered back to Tiler, "My friend, can you do me one favor before you leave the city?"

"If I can," he consented.

"Get word of my plight to a tailor named Mara Dannat. Tell her how it stands with me. If anyone knows where my two friends are, she may be the one. Have her tell them to flee, but not to Blythecairne."

"Aye, I know of Mara Dannat," Tiler buzzed. "I'll do it if I am able." In his hearty voice, he said, "Well, Sir Roarke, I shall see you in a few weeks, with the proof of your dragon with me."

He reached through the bars, and clasped Roarke's hand. "Luck to you, friend."

Roarke answered, "And to you."



Roarke, huddled in Tiler's cloak, was awakened from a nap sometime later by the sound of tapping on the iron grate of his cell. He peeked up to see the mocking smile of Herm the Prime Minister.

"Do you remember me, Roarke?" the man sang in a fey tone. "I don't think you do."

"Of course I remember you," Roarke said, annoyed. "What are you talking about?"

"I know a few things you may be interested in."

Roarke ignored him and covered his head with the cloak again.

"I know that you will never be able to produce any tokens from your dragon," Herm sang again in an affected voice. When Roarke refused to answer, Herm began tapping again, metal on metal, until Roarke stood and threw back the cloak.

"What is it you want from me, Herm?" he demanded, and then noticed with surprise that the item with which Herm was making the tapping sounds was none other than Roarke's own sword.

"Would you like to know what I had for dinner last night?" Herm taunted.

"No."

"Not precisely the king's usual fare, of course. Horsemeat, it was." Herm's eyes sparkled with malevolent glee. "Want to guess what color the horse was?"

Roarke stared at him curiously, wondering what game he was playing.

"Ah, the things I could tell you.... Well, you don't have anywhere to go, do you?"

Herm took a violent swing at the bars of Roarke's cell with his sword, putting a deep gouge in the blade. "Forged seven times, I heard, but it won't last forever, will it?"

Roarke wondered suspiciously where Herm had heard about the forging of his sword, but still said nothing.

"Would you like to see something, Roarke?" Herm taunted. "Roarkie-Roarkie-Roarke?" The knight turned in disgust and pretended to ignore him again, but was actually listening intently. "Well, perhaps I'll show you later."

Herm continued, "Tell me where you have heard these words before: *'Bury it deep in a pit someplace outside of town. Don't tell anyone where you take it, lest someone think they might make a charm out of the bones. That's a bit of witchcraft that we must avoid.'*"

Roarke thought that he dimly recognized the words ... then realized with a start that they were words he had spoken to Willum a year ago in Fairling, regarding the dragon's tail.

"Don't you remember that one?" Herm jeered. "How about this, then: *'There will be treasures and glories for all of you, but not from that beast. Please, sweep all of those scales into the pit, and cover them with the earth.'*"

Roarke knew that those were words he had spoken at Blythecairne, when he had ordered the destruction and burial of the dragon's carcass. At last he spoke, "How do you know those words?"

"*Aha!* The little man *does* speak!" Herm laughed maniacally, and took another swing with Roarke's sword, creating another gouge in the blade. "Can it be that you still do not know who I am?"

Realization came. Despair threatened to overwhelm Roarke then, as he understood, feeling destitute of all strength, that he once more was being addressed by the demon spirit of the dragon of Blythecairne.

Herm saw the terrible recognition darken Roarke's countenance, and laughed again. "Would you like me to tell you why you shall obtain no souvenirs from your dragon?" he asked.

"Why?" Roarke croaked.

"Simply this: I know where they all are, and I will not allow it. The simpering boy who used to travel with you was the only one who knew where my tail was buried, and he is no more."

Oh no—Will! Roarke thought desperately.

"The only one with the chance to bring back anything from my body which you buried under the dirt of Blythecairne is that old man Tiler. And let me tell you, just between you and me—" his voice dropped to a conspiratorial tone, "—he's not going to make it."

Roarke's heart, already miserable, saddened yet the more, thinking of the kind man who had given him his cloak.

Herm took on another affectation, appearing somewhat like a supercilious schoolmaster offering a lesson to a dull-witted student. "There are four of us here in Hagenspan, you know. Glorious spirits of living light, who were exalted in a dark world past, and long to be exalted again. And we will be, of course. Soon, soon, so very soon!

"When I was wearing the little troll at Blythecairne, I told you about my brother at Thrall that you killed, and my sister at Mendor.

"Well, perhaps, I was just a bit too generous with you when I suggested that you had actually *killed* us. But certainly you can see that for yourself now. The three of us joined our mother in the last remaining dragon in Hagenspan. Oh, how strong she is now! Waiting for the day of her revelation, which is coming soon, soon—so soon!

"But then when this little Herm of a man started practicing magic ... he opened the portal of his own tiny little spirit for one of us to come in and join him. How surprised he was when he realized I was there! How terrified!

"Since I had already had practice wearing the troll at Blythecairne, I was appointed by the others to come and wear this man. And here I am!

"And—how delicious this is—the very crimes that we ascribed to you: raising an army in the north, and taking over the throne of Hagenspan by force—we shall do for ourselves!" He uttered a short burst of insane cackling.

"Oh, it will be too late for you to see it, of course—too late, little Roarke. But I shall tell you about it: The army that we raise in the north will be none other than the dragon of Beale's Keep—my own family! And this little man, Herm, who imagines himself a magician, will be king! King of Hagenspan! Except, it will really be me. Me! Dressed in all the finery that a human can be clothed in, knelt before and pandered to by all of the ridiculous humans in this tiny Hagenspan that you think so vast.

"Periodically, perhaps, I shall trade places with one of my family, and they can practice wearing the man, and I can remember what it feels like to be a dragon again—strong, so strong ... and I shall once more taste man flesh! Ahhh! The day!"

Herm was now salivating so much that his words were coming out in slurs. "Forgive me, little Roarke. I see you do not love my story. You, who have caused more humiliation to me than any man should have ever been allowed!

"Just one more thing, before I take leave of you: I wanted to show you something. See if you can remember where you've seen something like this before." And Herm tore open the collar of his tunic, to reveal, knotted around his neck, many long, lovely strands of blonde hair.

Roarke felt as if he had been kicked in his midsection by a mule. The room started to swim around in his vision, violently lurching, until he pitched forward onto his face, senseless.

Herm frowned. "You disappoint me. Little Roarke. I said, you disappoint me."

When there was no response, Herm wedged the blade of Roarke's sword between two bars of the cell's iron grate, and bent the sword, bent it, until with a ringing clang, the blade broke in two.

"Perhaps I shall come and visit you tomorrow," Herm the Magician said, and tossed the broken sword on the floor.

Chapter Forty

Mara Dannat knelt by her bed in the back room of her shop, offering impassioned entreaties to Iesuchristi for merciful treatment of Roarke and safe passage for Will and Hollie. She clasped and unclasped her hands, wringing them, gripping so hard that her knuckles showed white. A sense of foreboding, a shadow of danger, haunted her prayers. She knew that Roarke had been taken by the king's guard—that much was common knowledge in the streets of Ruric's Keep—but she had not heard anything new beyond that.

She heard the heavy tread of a man's feet out in her showroom; strange, because it was very early in the morning for someone to have passed through her door. As she called out, "Who's there?" a voice came from the shop, "Mara Dannat?"

She rose and called, "Just a moment," and patted down her apron before stepping calmly out to greet her visitor. "Why, isn't it Tiler of Raussi!" she exclaimed. "How many years has it been since you have paid me a visit?"

"Too long, Mara, too long," the old knight grinned. "And as much as I'd like to stay and have a chat with you now, I'm on the king's business, and I can't stay but a moment."

"How mysterious," the white-haired woman said with a smile, and laid her hand upon Tiler's arm. "On the king's business and in a hurry, and yet you stopped to call on me."

Tiler cleared his throat tersely. "Fact is, my companion—young Glassrood—and I are headed north to County Bretay, and I told him to wait outside while I got a new pair of gloves from you for the journey. You don't happen to have any gloves, do you?"

"I probably have something that will do for you. That's not why you stopped, I take it?"

"Well," he said in a low voice, "I might be doing something that ain't entirely in accordance with the king's wishes, but I've brought you a message from Sir Roarke."

Comprehending the urgency of the moment for Tiler, she wasted no more time on small task. "What is it?"

"He thinks you might know where his lady and his boy are."

"I might."

"He wants you to get a message to them: to flee from Ruric's Keep, but not to go toward Blythecairne."

"I see," she nodded thoughtfully. "Is that all?"

"He wanted me to tell you how it stands with him."

"Please!"

"Well, the king's put him in prison, until some proof can be produced that he killed that dragon in Blythecairne, or else five weeks passes. If I don't get up to the castle, and find a bit of that dragon's carcass, and bring it back here in less than five weeks—well, let's just say, it won't go well for Sir Roarke."

"Oh, dear...."

"Guess that's just about it, then." Tiler concluded. "The gloves?"

Mara Dannat, knowing Tiler to be a man of integrity, decided to risk a question. "Tiler, may I detain you a moment longer?"

"Yes, a moment, sure."

"I do know where Hollie and Roarke's young man have gone. But I have no way of getting any message to them. They already have fled Ruric's Keep, and they are safe, I think, but I believe they must be made to know Roarke's circumstances."

"Seems so."

"Is your Glassrood a person that you trust?"

"I believe so; he's a little frustrated that he ain't home in Celester being trained for the Lordship right now. But he seems to be a fairly good boy."

"If I tell you where Hollie and the boy are, will you send Glassrood to them with the message, while you continue on to the north?"

"Ah, that I cannot do," Tiler said, with regret written upon his homely face. "You must understand, we're on the king's business, both of us. We cannot disobey."

Mara Dannat frowned. "I do understand. But I fear that if you travel north with Glassrood ... some disaster will befall you."

"Is that something your Iesuchristi has shown you?"

"Only in shadows, shadows. I just fear for you, my old friend." She laid her hand on his arm again. "But I have forgotten myself. You need gloves, and you need to be on your way. I'll have to find some other way to get the message to them."

"Thank you, Mara. When I return from the north, I'll stop and look in on you, and we'll have a chat about things less substantial." He smiled tenderly at the old woman.

She pressed a pair of gloves into his hands, and said, "Please do that. Be as careful as you can!"

"I will, Mara. I will."



"Oh, Rohh-arke ..." came the mocking voice of Herm again, as if from a dream.

Roarke lay face down upon the dank floor of his prison cell, groaning an inexpressible prayer to the Almighty. Through the night he had come as close to despair as he had at any time in the last twenty years. After Herm had left him the previous day, he had awakened, chilled and shivering, temporarily unable to recall where he was. Forcing himself to his hands and knees, he had crawled across the cell and vomited in the corner. Then he remembered.

He had not been fed again today.

"Rohhh-aarke," Herm sang again, louder.

Roarke continued to lie face down, wondering how Herm could possibly torment him any more today than he had already done yesterday.

"I see you have begun to despair," Herm said. "Good!" His voice dropped to a low tone. "I shall intoxicate myself on your despair, but we must not let it end too quickly, must we?" He bent and picked up the two broken pieces of Roarke's sword, which had not been moved since the day before, and tossed them to the other side of the cellblock. "Mustn't let Roarke decide to do himself in, now. If we want a long draught of this little man's bitter torment, we must furnish him with some nourishment, yes? Some food. And perhaps, just to make his distress all the more delightful ... just a smattering little tidbit of hope, to prolong his anguish."

Herm disappeared for a time, and came back with a loaf of bread. "Here you are, my good man: sustenance for your body." He tossed the bread over on the floor next to where Roarke still lay face down. "Come now, I know you're awake—I can feel your festering frustration."

Roarke remained silent.

"Hmm. I guess I'll have to give you some hope, so that you can rouse yourself and survive for these next five weeks.

"What, dear Roarke, would you desire, more than anything else in the world? Not the insipid blonde-haired slut, to be sure. Anyway, it's too late for her. The company of your boy? Oh, wait—too late for him, too!

"I know what you might like! You'd like to see me dead! Would that do?"

Roarke rasped, from his position on the floor, "I would like to see you dead."

"Then I'll tell you how it can be done! Isn't this exciting?" Herm seemed genuinely ecstatic at the prospect of telling Roarke how to accomplish his own undoing. "Do you think it was merest chance that I suggested to King Ruric that you must present him with tokens of my old dragon body? No!

"Because of the magic spells that little Herm here bound himself with, if I were to be actually presented with tokens of my own mortality, so to speak, I would be utterly undone! Isn't that delicious?" Herm howled with glee. "Of course, I would not die, as you well know, but I *would* be forced to depart from our friend Herm here, leaving him with whatever wits still remain to him. And," Herm cupped his hands around his mouth, "here comes the really hopeful part: if you were to somehow find some little snippet from my old body that would actually convince the king you had killed me ... you would be free! Free! Freeeee!"

Herm laughed for a long time then, doubling over in slavering gales of choking cachinnation. After he stopped laughing, he wiped his eyes and his mouth with the back of his sleeve, and said, "Oh, I almost forgot! If you should happen to obtain your freedom, you'll find that everything that you love has been utterly destroyed. The boy! The slut! Who knows, by then, perhaps even my mother will have moved from Beale's Keep to Blythecairne! Or Thrail! Who knows?"

Another long bout of laughing followed, and Roarke waited patiently for him to finish and leave, so that he could eat the bread. Finally, just to break Herm out of his maniacal laughter, Roarke spoke again. "Who knows? Perhaps Tiler *will* be successful...."

"Oh, that's good! That's good, Roarke! Hope! Hope! It will only add to your confusion and your despair in the end. Yes, perhaps.... But you cannot possibly think that I have given him, shall we say, a sporting chance, can you?"

Roarke figured that, out of all of Herm's devious mixture of truth and lies, *that* statement was quite likely to be true.

"Well, friend Roarke, it has been delightful," Herm said, "but I must go and present myself before the king. Poor man—he needs my counsel. Well, I shall do what I can to help." Turning to leave, Herm trailed, "Eat that bread! Keep up your strength! I may be back to see you tomorrow, and I hope for more dialogue next time."

Unable to resist one more barb, Herm turned back and said, "Perhaps, if you please me, I'll allow you to stroke my necklace. Would that make you happy?" With a twisted cackle, he departed.

Roarke thought of the golden hair braided around Herm's neck, and wept.

Chapter Forty-One

There was no road going southeast from Ruric's Keep to Mount Tendor, where the Amendicarii dwelt. Usually when travelers wanted to go south from Ruric's Keep, they rode the Eldric River down to the land of Sonder, and if they wished to go east, they would take the King's Road to Lenidor. Mount Tendor lay between the river and the road, and few wished to go there.

As the Eldric flowed from the city of Ruric's Keep, it first ran toward the southwest, then cut back to run almost due east, before taking one more turn and running generally southward all the way through Greening and Sonder. Mara Dannat had told Hollie to follow the course of the Eldric until the place where the river bent from its eastward course to flow south, and from there, to point their horses directly east toward the mountain. If they stayed true to their eastward bearing, they would soon come upon the dwelling places of the Amendicarii, the servants of Iesuchristi.

Now Mara Dannat traveled the path she had spoken of to Hollie. But whereas Hollie and Will had been on horseback, Mara Dannat was on foot. And she was old. She had scarcely realized that she was so old before starting on this excursion, but by the end of her second day of walking, she was patiently telling herself that this was "the last journey of Mara Dannat." She imagined that she was on pilgrimage, and that when she reached the Amendicarii, she would walk no more forever. She prayed for strength to reach the Amendicarii.

She found traces of horses that had passed this way several days earlier, and hoped that it was the two that had borne Hollie and the boy.



After four days of riding, Will spied a thin column of smoke rising from a short hut that was almost invisible against the backdrop of Mount Tendor. "Hollie, we're there," he said.

The girl, who had ridden very nearly in silence for the four days, said quietly, "I'm sorry, Willum."

"Don't mention it," Will said agreeably. He didn't know precisely what Hollie was sorry for, but he imagined it had something to do with running away from Kenndt's and causing so much trouble.

The two had had only one conversation of any substance during the four days of their journey. Other than that one, the girl had been either lost in thought, or stricken mute, or just senseless—Will could not tell which. But he was happy to hear her voice again.

They rode the rest of the way to the hut without speaking. Just before they arrived at the dooryard, a man stepped through the door, wearing a brown robe with a rope belt around his waist, and no shoes. He had a wild beard, tangled and windblown, brown hair mingled with gray.

The man held his hand up in greeting, noticed with appreciation the stallion Justice which Hollie rode, and spoke to her. "*Sere equare do shemblen arialinae.*"

Hollie looked at him blankly, not understanding.

"What'd he say?" Will asked.

"I'm not sure. It's Sonderen. I only know a few words."

The man spoke again, "*Em varsen fe Sonderen?*"

Hollie replied, "*Me varsen na. Em varsen fe Norderen?*"

The man nodded and said, "Some. I learning am."

Will asked, "Are you a Mendercarey?"

"Amendicarii. Yes."

"We been sent t' ye for sanctuary."

"Ah. Sanctuary. Yes."

"My name's Willum, and this is Hollie."

"Riccard I am. No women we have," he said with concern.

"Are ye the leader here?" Will asked.

"Leader I not. Matthias you seek," he said haltingly, as he sought the correct words.

"Will you take us to Matthias, then?" Hollie said.

"Not time enough. Soon night. Must sleep here."

The two dismounted then, and Riccard prepared a simple meal for them. He begged the two travelers to rest, while he took care of the horses. He especially admired Justice, but he fed both horses by hand, and rubbed them both down with hay from the floor of his hut. Discerning that Will and Hollie were not married, he had Hollie spend the night sleeping in the hut, and he and Will slept outdoors.

As Riccard was preparing to retire, he asked Will, "Pray, do you?"

"Aye, sometimes I pray with my friend Roarke."

"Good. Pray I now." And Riccard started speaking softly in the Sonderen language. To Will's ears, the words sounded lovely, like poetry, but he could make no sense out of any of them. He drifted off toward slumber with the lyrical phrases still rising softly in the dusk, and thought to himself, *Amen*.



Glassrood was troubled. Beside where he sat on the ground lay Sir Tiler, softly snoring. They were camped beside the road, about halfway between Ruric's Keep and Lenidor, and soon would be re-entering civilized areas. If he were going to do it, this should be the night.

Herm had made it sound so convincing, back at the palace. When King Ruric died, Herm would be king in his place. Of that Glassrood had little doubt. And as king, Herm would have the authority to name the next Lord of Celester, if he so chose. Glassrood thought of his spiteful, sniveling cousin, who was currently first in line for the lordship, and pouted.

And, if the inducement of the lordship had not been quite enough, Herm had insinuated that as king, he would also be able to produce some very painful and long-lasting punishments for anyone who disappointed him. The point was not lost on Glassrood, who disliked discomfort in any form.

But sitting here on the ground in the faint starlight, with Tiler sleeping soundly, trusting Glassrood to keep the first watch ... Tiler, who had been kind to Glassrood, and taken him under his wing.... It was harder to do this in person than to simply imagine it done.

Still ... the old man was sleeping. He would never know, never feel a thing. And Glassrood encouraged himself by thinking of all the good and noble things he would do as Lord of Celester. Silently, he slid his knife out of its sheath.

Chapter Forty-Two

The one conversation that Will and Hollie had had on the path to Mount Tendor had occurred as soon as they had left the city of Ruric's Keep behind them, and were safely away into the relative wilderness of the east bank of the Eldric River.

Will told Hollie of watching Roarke being led away by the soldiers, and Hollie had shared the information that Mara Dannat had been in prayer when she had suddenly sensed a warning that Roarke, Hollie, and Will were in great danger.

Hollie had asked Will, "Are you sure we're doing the right thing by running away, instead of trying to help Cedric?"

"Of course not," Will had replied. "But the seamstress woman thinks it's right ... and I do know one thing—if Roarke had a chance to tell me what to do, it woulda been to get you to safety."

"Why do you think that?"

Will had looked at her curiously then. He spoke slowly, "Miss Hollie, God knows ye're a pretty one, but sometimes I fear He ain't gifted ye with too much in the way o' brains."

At that her face flushed, and she started to make an angry retort, but Will cut her off.

"Forgive my bluntness. I'm sorry about my way o' speakin'. Roarke's been helpin' me learn polite talk, but mostly I forget, and just speak my mind." He tried again. "Miss Hollie, I know ye've lived a life that ain't too much acquainted with the ways of love."

She considered offering an angry reply to that as well, but realized suddenly to her chagrin that Will was right.

He continued, "But I must tell ye this: Ye're a loved woman. Ye're loved by maybe the finest man I ever knowed. Maybe the finest man there is in Hagenspan, I don't know. Lord Roarke is the wisest, gentlest, most caringest feller I ever met. Well, maybe I ain't met all too many men in my life, but he's still the best, and that ain't meanin' no disrespect to my Dad, neither.

"And, Hollie—he's absolutely smote with you. I've lived with Roarke just about every day for the last year and more, and I've never seen him like this. He loves you. And if ye had the brains God gave a whistlepig, ye'd run inta his arms and tell him, "Thankee, and it would please me t' live with ye forever."

Hollie had not yet been ready to surrender. "He just wanted me for his own slave!"

Will grimaced at that, and said derisively, "Are ye a slave, or are ye free?"

Hollie said, "Well—"

Will didn't wait for her answer. "It was always in Roarke's heart t' set ye free. It just happened so fast, it surprised him, is all. And what a price he paid for that freedom!"

Hollie began, "Kenndt—"

Will retorted, "I don't care what yer Kenndt said. Roarke didn't want me to tell you how much he paid for ye, but I don't care anymore. Maybe it don't even matter any more," he said bitterly, as the thought that Roarke was in dangerous captivity came again to his mind. "Hollie, he paid fifteen bloody *thousand* rurics for yer freedom."

Hollie nearly swooned when she heard that; she almost toppled from Justice before recovering her balance. "Really, Will?" she asked faintly. "Really?"

Will looked at her grimly and nodded.

Since that moment, she had barely spoken, other than to offer laconic responses to Willum's questions about directions or dinner.

But three more days of rumination, regret, and silent prayer had produced in her the response she had given to Will, when he said that they had reached the Amencarii: "I'm sorry, Willum."

She wondered if Roarke would still want her when she saw him again.

She wondered if she would see him again.

Chapter Forty-Three

A week passed.

Herm visited Roarke daily, bringing him bread and water, and mocking him.

Roarke spent his days in prayer and contemplation, and once his initial anguish over Will's and Hollie's deaths had somewhat abated, he no longer despaired. He comforted himself with the thought that none of these things were outside the providence of the Almighty. He remembered the words of his own morning song, and sang it as a prayer daily: *I trust Your goodness, come what may—I thank You, God.* And he promised himself that, if he got the opportunity, he would dispatch Herm to his reward, and rid Ruric's Keep of that menace. Perhaps he could never deliver Hagenspan from all of the foul spirits that threatened to devour her, but that too was in the hands of God. He would do what he could.

Glassrood dragged Tiler's body off into the brush at the side of the road, thinking to honor him by digging him a grave. He took his sword and started to dig, but quickly decided that it was just too much effort. Pulling the old man's corpse deeper into the undergrowth, he was startled to find the remains of another body already there, apparently dragged into the brush by some wild beast. A much smaller man than Tiler, he was now unrecognizable. Glassrood left the two bodies together in the tangle of weeds, companions in repose, and returned hastily to the road. Herm had told him to watch the route northward to make sure Roarke's young man Willum did not attempt to find his way to Blythecairne in hopes of retrieving the proof of the dragon. After four more weeks, he could go back to Ruric's Keep; he had that long to invent a story to explain the absence of Sir Tiler.

Riccard took Will and Hollie into the mountains, into the small settlement of the Amendicarii. It turned out to be a tiny farming community nestled between the crags of Mount Tendor on a little verdant plateau. The community was made up of men who had dedicated themselves to prayer to the God Iesuchristi, tending small gardens, and making simple crafts which they would periodically take to Ruric's Keep and trade for goods they could not produce themselves.

Matthias, the leader of the Amendicarii, was guarded around Hollie. He was a holy man, but he was also a man, and he recognized that the presence of a woman could do much to disrupt his quiet settlement of praying men. And a remarkable woman she was, too, fair of form and face. He withdrew from his own humble dwelling-place, and let Hollie live there, asking her politely to remain indoors as much as possible until he decided what should be done with her.

Hollie was mostly content to do as he requested. Willum was allowed to spend a few moments with her several times each day, informing her of the doings in the little village, and wondering anxiously about Roarke. Now that he had safely delivered her to the Amendicarii, Will longed to go back to Ruric's Keep and fight for Roarke's freedom. But Hollie begged him not to go, leaving her alone in this quiet place of brown-robed men who were not allowed to speak with her.

And while all these things were going on, Mara Dannat, weary and worn, walked.



At the end of nine days, Mara Dannat's meager supply of food that she had brought with her was exhausted. Her bones were sore from sleeping on the ground, and her legs were stiff and complaining each morning when she tried to

get them to walk again, to take a few more feeble, halting steps, then a few more, then more.

When she woke up on the eleventh morning covered by a wet blanket of snow, she feared that she might not awake on the twelfth.

She ate some of the snow; she hoped that it would not make her insides too cold. She wondered if perhaps she were insane, and earnestly hoped not. It would be unseemly for a servant of Iesuchristi to go mad. She tried to stand up, and found that she could not. *Well, perhaps I'll just lie here for a bit*, she thought, and went back to sleep.



Unxal walked down the path from the Amendicarii village to the hut where Riccard had dwelt for the past month. It was time for Riccard to rejoin the others for his joyous time of corporate fellowship and prayer, and it was time for Unxal to take the far watch, and spend a joyous month of solitary prayer and meditation.

Riccard was waiting for him, watching the mountain path for his arrival. "*Bondae, bon fratalianae!*" he called out a greeting to Unxal.

Unxal smiled and waved back at him. Beyond Riccard, far down the hill, he saw something fluttering in the breeze—a brightness of color that did not belong to the natural landscape.

"*Kesse de latta?*" he asked curiously, pointing toward the flapping swatch of blue and purple.

Riccard turned and looked. "*Me varsen na.*"

The two men walked cautiously down the slope toward the purple blemish in the snow. Unxal gave a startled cry of recognition when he saw it was a human

form lying crumpled upon the ground, and they sprinted the rest of the way to the fallen body.



Two days later, Mara Dannat awakened in the warmth of Matthias' hut, covered by furs and quilts upon the softness of his pallet, and saw Hollie's troubled eyes staring anxiously back into her own. She smiled feebly, and lapsed back again into unconsciousness.



The next morning, Mara Dannat's eyes fluttered, and she willed them to open, the pale light of the hut causing her to blink. Matthias was there, kneeling beside his own bed, offering soft prayers for her recovery.

"Matthias," she said in a trembling voice, "how good ... to see you again." She swallowed, her throat painfully dry.

"Mara Dannat," he said soothingly, stroking her hand. "You have come far."

Her cheeks rose slightly—a weak, pale smile. "I have ... a message.... Something...." She fell back asleep again.



The next time Mara Dannat awoke, she remembered something of her mission. She asked for Hollie, "I've come, seeking a blonde-haired girl ... I can't seem to recall her name." She shook her head, her eyes troubled. The man who happened to be tending Mara Dannat while Hollie was eating her dinner knew, of

course, exactly whom she was referring to. A moment later, Hollie was at her side, and Mara Dannat cried in a frail voice, "My dear! There you are!"

Hollie took Mara Dannat's thin, veined hand in her own, and brushed strands of white hair off the old lady's forehead. Her blue eyes were filled with mixed sorrow and hope.

"I have a word to say to you, before Iesuchristi calls me home," the old woman said in a whisper. "I have forgotten what it means ... perhaps you will understand."

Hollie nodded for her to continue.

"Your husband ... needs a piece of the dragon."

Hollie shook her head slightly, confused. "Mara Dannat, I don't understand."

The old lady smiled, and nodded her head. She closed her eyes, and lapsed into unconsciousness.



Hollie went to Will, who was standing in the center of the village talking softly with Matthias and two of the other monks. She was aware of the looks of disapproval from some of the men, and a certain fearful revulsion from some of the others, but she strode directly to Willum and addressed him.

"Will, Mara Dannat gave me a message, and I don't understand it. Maybe it's supposed to be for you."

"What is it?"

"She said that my—that Cedric needs a piece of the dragon."

"You're foolin' with me?" he said with a little thrill of excitement.

"Of course not!"

He made a quick decision then, and said to Matthias, "I got to leave to go back to the city. Will ye take care o' the women?"

Matthias replied that he would, with only a slight hesitation, and he shook Will's hand and said, "Our prayers will be strong for you, little brother."

Will nodded gratefully, and turned to Hollie. "I might know what yer Mara Dannat meant by her message. I don't understand what the meanin' of it could be, but I expect that that ain't up to me." He patted his chest and said, "Roarke carries a little pouch on his chest, what holds some stuff that's very important to him. Well, I got one, too. There ain't nothin' that's all that very important to me yet, but I do have a few trinkets in it, what I've never showed nobody.

"Roarke had me bury the dragon's tail, back over a year ago, and he wanted me t' bury it, every bit. But them scales was just so pretty, an' I never thought I'd ever have a chance to have somethin' like that again.... Well, I sorta disobeyed him. I kept eleven scales from that dragon, and I got 'em here with me now. If that ain't a piece o' the dragon, what else could that message mean?"

Hollie didn't want Willum to leave, but she thought that he could just possibly be right about the dragon scales being the answer to Mara Dannat's mystery. "Please be careful," she said, and she felt that she had not said nearly enough.

Will smiled then, a great, free smile, and said to her, "Miss Hollie, it's like as not that I'm ridin' off to my death now, so it ain't no time to be diddlin' around and not sayin' things I wished I'd said.

"I know ye're Roarke's woman, and I'm happy about that—truly I am. And I'm tellin' ye true when I say that Roarke loves ye dear. But I'd just like ye to know this, too—" he blushed as he said the next words, "—I'd be lyin' if I didn't tell ye, that I love ye, too.

"If I don't happen to make it back to see ye again, Hollie ... I'm just wonderin' if maybe ye'd sing a little song and maybe shed a tear over me?"

"Oh, Will!" She threw her arms around him and hugged him fiercely. "I swear I would kiss you, but ... I really need to kiss Cedric first."

"That's good enough for me," Willum laughed with the sudden release of the tension that had been growing, mounting, increasing for weeks, it seemed. "If I make it back, I'll remind ye that ye said so!"

"You won't need to remind me," Hollie said, as Will left to fetch his saddle and find Starlight.

Chapter Forty-Four

It had been three weeks since Roarke had tasted any food other than bread and water. He was very weak. The cold and damp of the dungeon cell had seemed to settle into his very bones, turning each day into a shivering, aching torment. His hair had turned from a silvery gray into white—as white as snow, whiter even than Mara Dannat's had been. His sunken cheeks and eyes gave him a spectral, otherworldly look ... and to be sure, there were not many moments now that went by without him thinking of the next world.

Herm had noted scornfully that Roarke was not going to survive until the end of the time appointed for his audience with the king. But neither the king nor the queen was told, and no guard was allowed to tend to Roarke's comforts save Herm himself.

A few days earlier Roarke had given up singing his morning song. It was not that he had stopped trusting God—it was just that, day after day, nothing seemed to change. Singing a song about "whatever adventures may come his way" had lost significance to him.

Roarke arduously rose to his feet, thinking that one day soon, he would no longer care enough to do so, but that he would sit quietly and wait to pass into God's country. He remembered his friend Knaiver, and wondered if he had already reached those shores. It hadn't been all that long since Roarke had last spoken with him at Blythecairne—maybe Roarke would get there first. Well, today was not going to be that day, anyway. He stood and began walking around the perimeter of his cell. It was five steps from each wall to the next, then turn and walk five more steps. Twenty times around the cell turning left, then twenty times more turning right. About eight hundred steps, if Roarke had calculated correctly. Then turn

around and start again. Usually, Roarke figured, he tried to walk about fifteen thousand steps each day—one for each of the fifteen thousand ruries he had paid for Hollie's freedom. There wasn't any particular significance to the number; it was just a figure to shoot for. But it also helped to keep Hollie alive in Roarke's memory. He tried repainting, stroke by stroke, the portrait he had created of her in his mind, and found to his sorrow that it seemed somehow blurred ... as if Herm had taken the heel of his hand and ground all the colors in together, a beautiful smudge. He hoped he would recognize her when they met soon in God's land.

He prayed often—most of the day—remembering his old friends from Blythecairne and Thrail, and asking for God's blessing upon their lives. Sometimes, he tired of speaking to the Almighty—it seemed his prayers tended to repeat themselves after awhile—so he talked to other people whom he imagined might have made it to God's country. He reasoned that, if the dragon spirit had been able to hear conversations he had had with Will and Lirey, then maybe other folks who had entered the spirit world might be able to hear him too.

He spoke to his father and mother, to his first wife Millisen, to Hale and Wilton, who had died at Blythecairne. Once or twice he spoke to Sinder Payn. And he talked to Hollie.

"Hollie, my love ... I expect you've found your way to the land, by now—the land where we will be forever young.... You've probably met Millisen. I hope she's making you feel comfortable." He took a few more shambling steps. "I'm coming, my dear ... I'm coming soon.... I know we were never really married here on earth, but ... my sweet one, my adored one ... it would please me so much if ... when I make it to where you are ... might I please have just one kiss?"

He turned and started back the other way. He directed his words to the Almighty. "I expect you heard what I asked Hollie.... I don't know what the laws are in your glorious eternal kingdom ... but if it's not too disrespectful ... one kiss

wouldn't be too bad, would it?" He listened for a moment to see if God might answer him, but if He did, Roarke could not yet hear. "Well, perhaps I'll find out soon enough," he said, and then it occurred to him that he just *might* have an adventure today after all.



Queen Maygret decided she had waited long enough. The question that had been burning in her breast for more than fifteen years had to be asked. Today she would go to the dungeon, find Roarke, and demand, "Why, after killing the dragon at Mendor, did you never come back?"

So she dressed herself in her favorite robes, and made herself as beautiful as she could. Over sixty years old, she was still a handsome woman—she was a queen, after all, and a descendant of the Feie—but of course her beauty could not rival the youthful bloom of that whore Roarke had brought to dinner. But still, Maygret had a regal elegance that was not unattractive.

It took her some time to find the dungeon—how many years had it been since she had had cause to come here? But at last, with the help of a guard, she did find the block where Roarke was kept in isolation.

She did not know what to expect. Would he rail against her in fury? Would he plead with her for mercy? Would he try to bargain with her for his freedom? Or would he simply, in that arrogant, condescending way that he had, explain that, in his great wisdom, he had chosen another path, and offer no apology at all?

The guard opened the heavy wooden door, granting her access to Roarke's cellblock. Immediately she was greeted by the offensive stench of human waste. Covering her mouth with a perfumed sleeve, she looked around trying to find

Roarke. He did not seem to be there at all, just one white-haired old man, shuffling around in a circle, muttering something to himself, apparently insane.

With a little cry of horror, she realized that the insane man *was* Roarke.

"Lord Roarke! What have they done to you?" she asked mournfully.

But the white-haired man continued to shuffle around in the circle, unhearing, muttering to himself still. As Queen Maygret watched with dismay, the man stumbled, fell to his knees, and then slowly rolled over onto his side.

End of Book Two

Roarke's adventures continue in

The Hagenspan Chronicles

Book Three



Roarke's Wisdom

Going Home

available at www.Hagenspan.com for whatever you can afford